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## Northside

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Northside

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Thesis

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Fine Arts in Creative Writing at the University of Kentucky

By Jesse Logan Houk

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Julia Johnson, Professor of

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## Abstract of Thesis

### Northside

The Northside of Lexington, Kentucky is an area with its own culture, community and art. While living in this community I was able to learn, grow and develop alongside this newly renovated area. The people and their lives intersect in such a way that creates a tension at times. However, many social awareness advocates vie for the success of this neighborhood for many years to come. The objective of studying such an area as the Northside in Lexington is to focus on the similarities rather than the differences in culture, community and art. With a collection of essays and literary journalism topics from Loudon Street on North Limestone to Short Street on North Limestone; the reader is taken on a journey of these snapshots over a three-year span between 2013 and 2016.

KEYWORDS: Northside, Lexington, Kentucky, Culture, Community, Art

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## Chapter One: Introduction

Born and raised on the southeast side of Louisville, Kentucky made me unfamiliar with the place I live now. I had to learn a lot about this city, the whereabouts of an anonymous fellowship I belong to and how to be a college student again at thirty years of age. Sober now, but once a train wreck of a person, I began this journey as a writer in my early twenties. Which brings me to the moment where I am now. As a member of the Northside of Lexington, Kentucky community I have found many treasures. My apartment was listed on Craigslist a few years ago with pictures of jazz trumpet murals. I moved into the neighborhood in the fall of 2013. Since that moment I have become a part of the community, yet kept to myself. North Limestone wasn't always the part of town that middle-aged college students wanted to live. Hell, it wasn't an end of town that many people really wanted to live in, but they're stuck here without affordable housing, jobs or clean water to drink. It was gentrified once before back at the turn of the 21st century. As an affluent neighborhood for industrialization workers and factory workers, the Northside of Lexington thrived for many years.

From New Circle Road to Loudon on North Limestone, houses lined the area supported by good paying jobs. The homes the people lived in on this part of town were nice working middle-class homes. Up and down Loudon on either side of Limestone there were factories and industrial buildings that promoted the growth of the community. Sometime in the middle to late turn of the century all

of this growth was halted and as jobs left so did many of the working middle-class, leaving behind the lower middle-class workers to fend for themselves.

With no jobs and very little resources the stretch of land between 4th street and Loudon on Limestone became an area known for crime, poverty and increased segregation.

The place where I live today is a renovated apartment complex. A couple of jazz horn murals hang on the wall of the building. Thick shrubs line the entrance and a narrow sidewalk leads down the row of apartments into the alley on Harry Street. Still today this street is known for the high traffic of drugs and addiction. Sex workers are often walking up and down the alley behind my home, looking for the next john so they can score another hit. Everywhere I go I see this kind of decadence, a betrayal of human rights. People doing what they have to do despite themselves. In order to survive on the Northside, it takes resilience. Still, over the last decade or so the area has become re-gentrified once again. Students from Transy, affluent businessmen, upper middle class new families all are beginning to flock to this area of town. There's a resurgence of the sense of community here, yet a denial of the community that has lived here since the first economic boom took place. The majority of the population here are poor working-class people: white, black and Latino. That's not to say that the businesses and living spaces are now all owned by these same people. With the Great Recession beginning in 2008 in America came another set of problem, affordable housing.



Everywhere around me are people that have been here far longer than I have. Old School and Henry Earl are two of the neighborhood homeless men. Old School is an older black man in his late 70s with a short beard, a hitch in his step and endearing eyes that tell me he is the neighborhood guardian. Memorialized by a David Letterman sketch as the most arrested man in the United States, Henry Earl, walks the block seeking attention and protection. He is a shorter black man with wiry gray hair, big bugged-out eyes, his emaciated body frame doesn't do his witty-smart aleck personality any justice these days.

Down the toward the beginning of the newer part of North Limestone are remnants of Maurice Manning, professor of English at Transylvania University; and, Kiptoo Tarus, artist and student of public art in Lexington. Manning was once a Pulitzer Prize finalist, yet looks like any average white male in middle-age. His glasses sit atop his defined jawline, piercing blue eyes, between his eloquent speech are the patterns of a weathered veteran of the literary world. Kiptoo's hands are weathered in the way in which most sculptor's hands become over time. A young, dark-skinned African man with short dreads, bloodshot eyes wearing jeans and leather boots became one of my dearest friends in a most unusual way over the past couple of years.

Marsha is a short white lady with blondish-gray hair that works at the Carnegie Center for Literacy and is another writer close the North Limestone community. She reminds me of an older Amy Sedaris and when I met her she

gave me the opportunity to work with her and others, teaching young kids the importance of being diligent students.

Melissa an Asian-American with freckles, is a lesbian business owner of Doodles on the corner of Fourth and North Limestone. She plays in a band with a friend of mine, named Warren Byrom. Warren is a slender, wiry gray-haired white guy that reminds me a lot of a younger Bob Dylan. He plays in several bands in Lexington. Both Melissa and Warren I met through the music scene here in Lexington, but more specifically, at Al's Bar next door to my apartment.

David Napier or as most people call him, Chill, is also a musician on the Northside of Lexington. He's a dark-skinned black man with the best laugh ever. He usually sports a large afro and a kinky beard that often reflects my own when I grow one. He's a funny dude and takes his business serious, but loves playing and jamming with his two bands, The Baja Yetis and Driftwood Gypsies.

Hendrick Floyd also known as Shiesty Khrist is an area emcee legend that I met on North Limestone a few years ago in 2014. He's a light-skinned black man with long hazelnut dreads and a boisterous voice. Hendrick is also a bartender at West Sixth Brewing, a few block down sixth street from North Limestone.

On the corner of North Lime and Sixth street is where Homegrown Press, John Lackey's studio can be found. Lackey is an older white man with shoulder-length pepper-gray hair and beard. He is an artist in every sense of the word. He

is friendly and really easy going, knowing most of the people in the neighborhood by their first name.

Across the street at Al's Bar, Levi, is the bouncer. The brother of Old School and a member of the Limestone community for his entire life; he is an elderly black man that stands as big and tall like an oak tree. His gravel-voice and wheezy laugh are two of his defining characteristics. I've had the opportunity to get beat by him several times in a row on the pool table at Al's Bar. Usually he sits at the backdoor of the bar and keeps watch, collects glassware and talks to the locals when he's working.

Down the road a few blocks is Wild Fig, a black-owned bookstore and coffee shop run by Crystal Wilkinson and Ron, her husband. Crystal is an older black woman with red-rimmed glasses, a small afro and a smile that could warm the heart of the most cold-hearted person on the block. Likewise, Ron is her counterpart sharing the responsibility of keeping the bookstore a safe environment for everyone. He's a black man with long dreadlocks, heavy-set frame and endearing eyes that speak truth. I've had the opportunity to get to know both of these wonderful people on a first name basis, and they remember me every time I come into the shop. I usually talk books and comics with Ron. Crystal likes to engage in small talk and lives the life of a writer whom observes and quietly analyzes the room.

A few doors down from Wild Fig is my tattoo parlor, known as Charmed Life. The parlor is owned and operated by Robert Alleyne. He is a middle-aged

white guy with gray facial hair, tall lanky frame and glazed eyes. He's been tattooing for over two decades and might be the best tattoo artist in Lexington, Kentucky. I got to know Robert when he did a half sleeve on my right shoulder of Mount Horai in Japan. He's a diligent tattoo artist with skill in Japanese tattoo artwork.

Griffin VanMeter, I met a few years ago when I wrote a piece about the Bluegrass Conspiracy. He's a middle-aged white guy, reddish hair, and a dark sense of humor. He started Kentucky for Kentucky with some other friends a few years ago. Kentucky for Kentucky is an organization aimed at rebranding Kentucky tourism and admiration. Griff along with the other associates have done a lot of hard work to make the North Limestone community a better place to live. He gets a lot of negative feedback, but I truly believe he is doing a great job making North Limestone a community again.

Tanya Torp is what I like to call the neighborhood matriarch. She embodies the characteristics of several of these people into one individual aimed at creating social change justice on the Northside of Lexington. She is a middle-aged black woman with short, spiral-curled hair, squinty eyes and a smile that makes you feel like you've known her your whole life. She does a lot of work with Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, which is an organization that creates social justice all throughout Kentucky. Tanya and her husband, Christian, are also urban farmers. They grow their own food and once a month have a breakfast at their home called Heinz Breakfast, named after the family that lived

in their home before them, which used to have the same sort of community sit-down.

A few years ago I read a novel by Walter Mosley called *Devil in a Blue Dress*. The North Limestone community reminds me of this novel, because everyone here is searching for the definition of home. The idea of having a home is somewhere where you can feel comfortable and a space that is a part of your everyday life. A house is much different than a home. The structure is the house. Yet, a home is more defined by the people that inhabit the structure. Mosley's novel raises questions about the neighborhood where Easy lives, his friendships and his means of income. As a black man in Los Angeles after the Second Great Migration of African Americans, Easy, finds himself caught in the confusion of what it means to call this place he lives, his home. I can relate to this miscalculation in 2016 as a part of the North Limestone neighborhood. I grew up in a working middle class, predominantly white neighborhoods of Jeffersontown. To be from a working class family, often meant my father and mother were both working while I was in school. My sister and I still had the opportunities unlike a large portion of the poverty stricken areas of Louisville. Our mom and dad always struggled with paying bills, keeping up with the upper middle class. My sister and I were bussed to downtown Louisville, which is now a gentrified community off Market Street. Lincoln Elementary in Louisville was on the east end of the city, but not yet changed as it is now.

Wayside Christian Mission was across the street as well as several government projects.

However, as our parents struggled to make a home for us in Jeffersontown and kept our education a priority, we both were given the opportunity to attend two of the best private schools in the city.

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## Chapter Two: Northside

I moved to the Northside of Lexington, Kentucky in November 2013. That summer I thought I found a place in the backyard of Woodland Park, which turned out to be owned by a slumlord named Craig Ivory. He is an older man with beady eyes, a rosacea-face and a penchant for swindling people. When I moved into his apartment for rent one evening and out the next day, you might say I was relieved to find my apartment on North Limestone. A few weeks later, that November, I met my new landlord Lana McKinley. Lana is the type of landlord you want to have. She is a kind, older woman with a welcoming demeanor. Over the next few years, I came to know North Limestone as my home. This is the place where I found all of the culture, community and art I was searching for while a student at UofK.

### North Limestone

The street once known as Mulberry is now home to many various community members of a wide range of demographics. Black, white, Mexican, gay, straight, old, young, wealthy and poor people all live in my neighborhood. It wasn't always like this and it's for this reason this area of Lexington is an obvious gentrified community on the Northside. Local coffee and donut shop, a private press/art gallery, a skate shop, arcade/bar, tattoo parlor, bike shop, used bookstore, a once-black now gentrified hole-in-the-wall bar, trendy barbershops, a couple of foodie restaurants and a local community organizing headquarters make up the business portion of the area. Since moving here I've met artists,

musicians, intellectuals, crack heads, alcoholics, homeless people, social organizers, radio hosts and made life-long friends with many of them. It's easy to see our community from the outside and say there goes another gentrified neighborhood. However, after living here for a few years I can say that I feel more of sense of a community than any other place I have ever lived. Despite being burglarized last year while away on holiday break, I'm not constantly in fear of crime and unfortunate circumstances. While there are some wealthy people in the neighborhood, the majority of the population is poor, working-class, good southern folk. Even the people with lots of financial security are neighborly and treat others like they want to be treated.

#### Homeless

Rainbow and Old School are two of the neighborhoods oldest homeless people. Rainbow is a black man that walks all over Lexington, but mostly around North Limestone. He rolls a shopping cart up the street with a hoard of trash bags tied to his cart. His hair and clothes are usually unkempt, eyes fixed to the road, rarely waving to anyone when they call his name. Old School, quite the opposite, is the brother of the bouncer (Levi) at Al's Bar. When I see him on the street I wave and say Hi. He's always funny, nice and somewhat drunk. Old School wears big work boots year round, walks with a hitch in his step, and has salt-and-pepper gray hair. He swears like a sailor and claims to be the neighborhood guardian of sorts. He's a peacekeeper for the most part, but he's been known to get agitated when young fools mess with him. Other homeless



regulars include: Sideshow Bob, Blond-lady that fixes her hair in windows and Henry Earl (the most-arrested man in the country).

Henry Earl is known for his cantankerous attitude and once-intimidating violent antics. Now he's just another of the homeless people that roam around the neighborhood attempting to keep up his namesake of most-arrested man in the nation. Once he came into North Lime Coffee & Donuts when I was working there demanding to know who the music on the radio was.

After being escorted from the coffee shop for hiding in the bathroom, Henry Earl asked, "Who's that playing on the radio, Stevie Wonder?"

I answer him from the other side of the coffee bar, "It's Stevie Wonder, yeah. I know you know who that is."

"Nah man, I'm Sugar Ray Leonard!" Henry Earl says lifting up his fists and punching the air in front of him.

"Alright alright, time to go," Chill, my manager tells him, "I told you, you're not allowed in here anymore. You know the rules."

Henry Earl takes a swing at Chill almost landing a punch. "I said, I'm Sugar Ray Leonard!"

He takes his leave and turns back into any other person on the street as he leaves the café. The fighting stance turns back into broken man, with no real authenticity or agency, other than an arrest record. I feel sad as he leaves the coffee shop, but also relieved for the fact that there isn't anything to do. It's almost the same feeling as not enabling an addict or an alcoholic or feeding wild

animals. Until he wants help you sort of just have to use tough love and tell him no. Sad, but it's true, people like Henry Earl are all around the Northside.

For me, North Limestone, is still strange at times and is hard to characterize as being one way or another. Most of the people that have lived here all of their lives have a healthy distrust of all of us outsiders that move into the neighborhood. I can't say that I blame them or that I feel like an outsider though. My neighbors are friendly always waving and nice when I see them. Yet, it's like anywhere when someone new moves into the neighborhood it takes a while to acclimate to the change. North Limestone has not always been a nice place to live. In the early 1900s the neighborhood was known for the industrialism, blue collar workers and affordable housing. Around the middle of the century, the industry moved out and left many residents fighting to find jobs, pay their bills and deal with rising crime. From then until now in 2016, the neighborhood of North Limestone was considered to be a rough area of town. In the last 5 to 10 years this area began to have new local businesses move in, along with mostly white residents and their newly renovated homes. After the housing market crash and predatory lending Ponzi schemes, many residents, were forced to adapt to the changing face of their neighborhoods nationwide. For the most part gentrification of once poor black communities by wealthy white property owners took place. An old liquor store became North Lime Coffee & Donuts. An abandoned neighborhood southern-fried, food-joint became a chain-chicken joint. The thrift store at the end of North Limestone became Kentucky for

Kentucky headquarters. An old hemp drying warehouse became Charmed Life Tattoo. And, several dilapidated homes were remodeled or renovated for college kids, recent graduates and new homeowners. The face of the neighborhood started to change around 2009. Once known for crime, drugs and prostitution this area on the Northside of Lexington was once again inhabitable. When coffee shops, barbershops and tattoo parlors move in, the white community does too.

### Ivory Tower

August 2013, my mom and dad came to Lexington to help me fix up the place Mr. Ivory was renting me on Woodland. The apartment was previously rented by a stripper, so I was told, who fell on hard times and was unable to stay. A pile of kitty litter, cat piss and shit sat at the landing of the staircase on your way up to the loft apartment. Dingy blue-stained non-tread carpet, covered the majority of the floor. To your left, is a bathroom with a toilet scantily-built above the muck-covered vinyl flooring. The shower is a single-install fabrication tightly-placed beside the door. Covered in what seems like months of soap-scum, fungal growth and the shower itself needs plumbing work done. I'm thinking to myself when Mr. Ivory shows me the place, that I like a challenge and I can accept cleaning the place up a bit before moving in that afternoon. My mom and dad came to the rescue to help me do some deep cleaning and preparing the loft apartment for the move. We spent some five to seven hours cleaning, fixing and disinfecting the apartment with our own supplies. As I was using a borrowed carpet cleaner to vacuum the makeshift litter box on the landing of the staircase,

Mr. Ivory came in to fix the shower. A few moments later the tenant from below came up to instruct us not to run any more water in my new apartment, because their ceiling was now pouring water down the walls.

Most people would not move into an apartment with this kind of immediate warning sign. Given my desperation to find an apartment before the Fall semester began, I paid little heed to all of the warnings. A couple friends of mine helped me move into this new bedlam of terror. We sawed my bed-frame in the middle to fit it up the staircase. We carried all of my possessions up three two flights of stairs. We moved quickly and finished in two hours. The shower and the toilet were still not working when I moved everything, so I told Mr. Ivory I needed them fixed immediately that night. As I went back to stay at a friend's after locking up the place, I worried for the safety of my personal belongings. Mr. Ivory insisted I pay the deposit and first month's rent up front, a total of \$650. I paid him cash and he wrote me a receipt not signing his name on a post-it note. At the time, I was very naïve of his plan. The next day, I came back to notice the door to my new apartment unlocked and wide open. I ran upstairs to find everything still in its place. The downstairs neighbor was snooping and came upstairs.

"Someone was in your apartment last night," the tenant from downstairs tells me, "I think they were with a hooker."

I'm furious, but I maintain my composure asking him, "Are you sure it wasn't the previous tenant?"

“I’m pretty sure. The cops showed up and Mr. Ivory was here last night to talk to them. I think your neighbor below you called them.”

Mr. Ivory previously told me not to talk, to this neighbor I was talking to, yesterday. He is something of a vagabond or some kind of hanger-on of the girl who lived on the first floor. So, I was kind of skeptical I could believe what he was explaining to me. I immediately called Mr. Ivory.

“Hey, this is Jesse Houk. I just started renting the loft apartment on Woodland. Can you give me a call at your earliest convenience, there seems to have been a break-in on the first night at the place?” I left a voicemail on Mr. Ivory’s phone.

No call back for several hours, no refund for the apartment and a group of good friends with another U-Haul that evening. I was right back where I started. Living at a friend’s apartment on Transylvania University’s campus I started looking for another place to live. Scrolling through Tulia, Zillow and Craigslist apps on my phone I couldn’t have been any more frustrated. I hoped for a good environment to work, study and living space that would allow me to get my dog back to Lexington too. The residence I was living at on Transy’s campus wouldn’t allow me to have a dog. My parents agreed to watch her for me for a couple of months while I found a new place to live. The Mr. Ivory debacle turned into a mess and after talking to the proper authorities about the situation, they already knew of him. He’s a slippery character. The only way to get your money back is to take him to small claims court. This means court costs, paperwork and

time I didn't have before my final year as an undergrad at UofK. So, I decided to chalk this up as a bad decision on my part. I rushed into the scenario and wanted to be play victim, but in the end I made the bad decisions and learned a valuable lesson when renting property.

#### Love shack

Welcome Home is written on the chalkboard on the backside of the stove when I move into my new apartment at 557 N. Limestone. A couple months after school starts in the Fall of 2013 I'm settling into this place. The adobesque design with coffee bags, reclaimed barn wood, railroad ties, scrap granite counter-tops, tobacco-stake cabinets and vintage license-plated/straw-ceilings makes for an eclectic little home. This is my new love shack.

A one bedroom, one bath with a kitchen and den will be the place where I will get my heartbroken, dreams realized and goals accomplished. Though I didn't know this at the time. I got to work writing. In the following spring I met a girl that I fell for headfirst. The first time since I moved to Lexington I am in love.

While she is finishing her Master's I am finishing my Bachelor's. Our age difference is eight years, but our age gap relationship doesn't matter, que sera, sera. A few months go by and my pension for falling fast and then falling hard remains. Another lesson in unrequited love leaves me chain-smoking cigarettes, not eating regularly and obsessing over someone that had too much baggage for me to unpack alone. In 2014, I finish my Bachelor of Arts in English with a minor in Communications. I begin working for a software company in downtown

Lexington that Fall. I start grad school working as tech support for a startup company that streams sports for local high schools, NCAA college sports and various other random video streams. Some nights while I'm alone working in the dark, I go outside to smoke a cigarette, wonder what-the-girl-is-doing why I didn't try harder, to make it work and I hope no one is calling or emailing me about their broadcast because I don't really have an answer as to why they can't get Wi-Fi reception in the middle of nowhere, or how come they can't see anything other than advertisements, because that's how we make the money for our company, it's a necessary evil of corporate America, and I'm staring at the blue smoke from my light-menthol American Spirit thinking about smoking another, or what it must feel like to hit the pavement from a balcony on Main Street, then the sirens and drunk college kids roam below and I remember I'm sober, and how that would break my mother's heart or cause everyone in my life to question why I would do something so selfish when in reality I'm really just depressed because my heart hurts so bad that I am fortunate enough to know what it feels like to have a heart, a place to live and a purpose in my life; so, I go back inside the building and open my laptop reinvent the present that I make an appointment with my shrink to talk about this shit, before it kills me or hurts someone else not physically but deep down emotionally that scars the way they are and makes them unable to really trust people, but it's okay to let down the wall when you're vulnerable sometimes and let people get to know you.

The roof over my head, when I get home, is comforting. And I like feeling the coziness of it when it's raining outside. It rains a lot that Fall, in 2014. Then, I leave the job at the tech support place and start working for North Lime Coffee and Donuts next door. I'm writing a lot and finding my voice in writing workshops. I meet all sorts of people at the coffee shop. Had I not had this opportunity I think my bubble would be really small inside my apartment. For the first time since I'm on the Northside I feel a connection to all of the people in the community. I start to exercise more per the advice of several trained professional head doctors. Everyday, I drive to the YMCA on the Northside and walk two miles. I do this for a month. I slowly start to realize that my diet, portion control, food choices are changing as well. As this changes, so does my exercise routine, and I begin to run two miles a day. The loop I do around the YMCA and Lexmark is comforting and gives me time to not think and just focus. Soon, I start running three miles a day four times a week. Every two weeks, I add another day until I'm running a 5K/six days a week. I lose thirty-five pounds between the heartache and head-check. My love shack begins to turn into a meditation place, workspace and a home. I'm meeting all sorts of people inside of work. There are lots of nice, talented and interesting people in the North Limestone neighborhood. John Lackey always comes in and gets a cup of coffee with almond milk, but rarely a donut. Hendrick Floyd known as Sheisty Khrist comes in to the coffee shop and makes my day fun. He always gets dark roast with a splash of soy, sometimes a donut if it's unusually fantastic. I meet Kakie



Urch for the first time. She's the woman that started the UofK radio show. Her boisterous, foul-mouth makes me have to hold my tongue in front of customers at times. It's hard not to get excited and join in on her sort of humor. I realize that North Limestone Coffee and Donuts is also a little love shack not unlike my new apartment. And so is Al's Bar, Charmed Life, Kentucky for Kentucky, Arcadium all of these local businesses are filled with love and good vibrations.

### We the People

I'm running to save lives, not for office. A friend of mine, Josh Nadzam, starts a mobile art studio in 2015 called Art on the Move. I begin asking myself what I'm doing for the community where I live. A friend of mine and I are talking one day. She invites me to Tanya Thorp's Justice House for the monthly Heinz Breakfast. This month KFTC hostess Beth talks to everyone in attendance about the need for non-profiteering in our communities. KFTC is the Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, which is an organization that does a lot of work to stop mountain-top removal. Also, they develop plans for sustainable living and safe water supply in our state.

When I meet Tanya Thorp at the Justice House I have no idea she lives only a couple of blocks away from where I live. Her and her husband recognize that the Northside is a food desert. So, they grow their own food in the front yard of their home. Bags of groceries in her house go to families in the neighborhood that are less fortunate and without access to clean, fresh produce. A Black Lives Matter sign is posted in her front yard.

I reimagine a story of Tanya squaring off against a man named Rock. He's a large dark haired, partially balding, very tan and boisterous man. He may or may not be involved in buying the property where I live. Tanya is a big woman with a heartwarming smile, inviting eyes and a temper you don't want to mess with. I can see her spouting off orders to Rock about his practice of undermining an elderly lady in order to purchase her home. Rock reaches for his wallet or checkbook, but Tanya slams it from his hands. In the madness an elderly lady walks outside with a walker and Tanya stands in front of her protecting her home. Rock leaves the scene after his jaw-drops and he's dumbfounded that such a commotion was made over his shady practices.

Beth and Tanya have organized the breakfast today in the summer of 2015 to get more members for KFTC. Pancakes, quiche, croissants, coffee and juice are all part of the breakfast served by volunteers of the community. Everyone sits at the big table in Tanya's house and talks about all sorts of issues of concern.

Republicans, Democrats and Independents all gather around to talk shop. Mostly liberal and progressive conversations take place, however, every now and then some radical revolutionary ideas are tossed around the table. I'm pretty quiet most of the time I'm there for my first visit. I talk to Tanya about getting gleaned food from restaurants around Lexington for the homeless shelters.

"I went to Washington, D.C. a few years ago for a trip with the Youth Service Organization Project with UofK," I explain to Tanya with a mouthful of buttermilk pancakes. "They had several homeless shelters that would take the

leftovers or abundance of gleaned food from local restaurants. Does Lexington do anything like this?"

"Well, I'm all about the gleaned food project. I do a lot of work with people that can't afford the food at these Good Foods and Whole Foods stores. My husband and I usually get groceries and donations to families that are living in this food desert," she helps me understand the words glean and food desert as gently used food or an area where food is not grown. "KFTC also is helping us to raise awareness about the water table in this area of the community."

"That's awesome," I say thinking I'm not doing anything nearly that important, "so, you all are trying to do something without funding for the poverty situation in the Northside."

"Yeah, we try to stay on the firing lines of the war on poverty," Tanya says.

I listen shortly thereafter our conversation to Beth explain KFTC and their idea of self-sustained contributions. The first time I heard about KFTC was a benefit show that Jim James, Ben Sollee and Daniel Martin Moore played a show for at the Brown Theater in Louisville. All of the tickets sales went to help KFTC fight against mountain-top removal. A coal industry practice that damages the beautiful mountains of Kentucky in the name of environmental destruction, this is why it's a terrible way to get energy. Beth and I talk after she gives her spiel about donating and joining the membership of KFTC to potential donors. She tells me it's not an easy job getting people organized in a state where despite bleeding blue, still believes so red.

If, there is to be any progress made in the Northside community, then it must start on a local level. There's a need for people not just in this community, but outside of the state to value organizing the local market to make changes important for the place where we live. Changes are not something everyone likes, especially when it affects their routines and daily lives. Sometimes the changes we make start from within before we can truly help anyone else. And when situations become desperate enough and as many people are affected by loss of universal healthcare, lack of funding for education and rising cost of living despite raising minimum wages then we must come together to find a better solution. The voices of many and various people need to be heard in order for any sort of major changes to happen. It's a fact that the standard of living changes along with the gentrification of the Northside of Lexington, but it's important to remember the lives of people that fought for this change. People in the community, culture and art world all have a voice here on the Northside.

#### The Hole

Really, the beginning of North Limestone starts with the hole in the middle of downtown. One of my first experiences with the nightlife in Lexington was over ten years ago. The Dame was hosting a show by the Cunninlynguists with special guest Sheisty Khrist. A few years later, that amazing music palace was torn down to make way for a horse park. Then, the horse park idea was abandoned for a high rise skyscraper. Hence, the giant hole in the middle of Lexington. It's time to fill in the void. To date, the best idea I've heard for this

area is a Kensington Park sunken garden built for the community of Lexington, Kentucky. The enormous void in the middle of downtown at the beginning of North Limestone could start something for the rest of the city. A sunken garden with areas for people to congregate during the summer. Live music, arts, crafts and everything that Kentucky has to offer could grow from that awful void where people once went to the Dame to hear live music and enjoy downtown Lexington. Instead, a square block with an enormous blue and white crane has sat there for two and a half years.

When I first moved to Lexington, Kentucky Boomslang Festival was still happening. After some financial troubles the festival ceased to exist. One of the major renovations that happened in my hometown was the Riverfront Park in Louisville. Along with this was the Forecastle Festival, Wfpk Concert Series, and various other arts and cultural events. Imagine a sunken garden in the middle of downtown Lexington and all of the possibilities. Just up the street from the Hole are several local businesses that would greatly appreciate this marketable idea. If the Northside is going to grow or even develop (as is suggested by the area, I live in now) then start at the Hole at the beginning of North Limestone. A gravel pit, cranes, concrete traffic walls and fences are not the type of community infrastructure that breeds any sort of innovation, creativity or camaraderie.

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### Chapter Three: Wildfig

This place is not the place where I grew up, but I have come to know Lexington as my home. I want to stay forever. My life is a working dedication toward finding place. In the end, I think this is something that every human being wishes to find. A place to call home. Agency in the community where they live. For poor working class people like myself, I am indebted to those that include me. I am human. And being human takes work, empathizing, loving one another. I used to believe that I was terminally unique and I was not afraid of anything. I used to think that I wanted to be left alone. Give me, rather than, what can I give. This is something I have hope for. I have something to offer. Always. I can do more than I am within the community in which I live to make others lives mean something. In the end of life, not everyone learns this valuable lesson. How to live, and be participant in life, rather than apart from everyone else; I think this is an essential lesson to learn before we die.

The plundering's, dreaming's, searching's of human beings is of maximum concern. Crystal Wilkinson is the owner of Wild Fig, a local coffee shop, bookstore and community reading center. "My biggest fear is that this place will become Seattle," Crystal Wilkinson says, "it will be one of those districts that will be overly gentrified, a hip and happening place to go." When I ask her where she envisions the North Limestone area 20 years from now, she tells me that she understands that NoLi CDC, and Griff Van Meter, really are doing their best to address the issue of gentrification on the Northside. Yet, in Crystal's

understanding of gentrification, once the displacement starts happening, there isn't much you can do to stop it. This sentiment is echoed by Tanya Torp later that day. Crystal is one of the few black business owners on Limestone, there exists some psychological pressure, to succeed as one of the handful of businesses owned by African Americans. I'm standing at the coffee bar of Wild Fig while Crystal tries to help me understand exactly what it means to be emotionally invested in the community. I imagine it's somewhat exciting to have your own business. Yet, at the same time, I imagine for her there exists a level of contributing to the appropriation. As an outsider, or a transplant to Lexington, I don't feel comfortable talking about such heavy stuff as gentrification without doing some research. Crystal's not from here either, so I feel a common relation between her and me. We are both living, working and part of this community, but we have not always been a part of it. She has weekly readings at her bookstore Wild Fig, which helps the neighborhood to get in touch with the conversationalists like her and I. I believe that both of us want to do something more than contribute to a problem that plagues the nation today. And if you ask most residents, transplants or transients on the Northside if they want to do the same, they would probably like to be included in this conversation.

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I'm heading to Loudon Avenue. The tires on my bike need air. Over the winter the air in bike tires lose some air due to the switch in barometric pressure. Like myself, I feel the pressure switch when it goes from hot to cold, and cold to hot,



again in what feels like a couple of days. This is Kentucky weather. I gather my gear for the day, climb onto my bicycle, and begin pedaling toward the Broom Wagon Coffee & Bike Shop. My tires are nearly flat as I pedal onto North Limestone. By the time I hit the corner of Loudon and North Limestone, I begin to worry I'm going to skid out and wreck this bike. Thankfully, I get there without a wreck and one of the dudes at the bike shop helps me with a couple of issues. First he helps me with my handlebars and then with my flat tires. After this I hit up the coffee shop for some caffeine. I'm sitting reading Ta-Nehisi Coates' memoir *Between the World and Me*. The coffee shop is quiet, has the feel of a tavern with wooden floors, tables and grade-school-style chairs. A quaint atmosphere with a full kitchen, some Magic Beans coffee, and lots of natural light make this place feel like your own living room. Magic Beans is a Lexington coffee roaster that makes some quality coffee. If I were writing an article on coffee I would talk about Magic Beans, Nate's Coffee, Small Offerings and Northside Pride. All of these are the fuel that keeps the gears turning. Nevertheless, this is not that article. As I settle in reading Coates' novel, about black love, I am beside my neighbor Phil's business meeting. Phil makes kimchi and is a local farmer that lives next-door to North Limestone Coffee and Donuts. He's giving his spiel to a potential investor about the kimchi business he's starting. I'm nose deep by this time in the heavy language of community, Coates' language.

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I digest these words Ta-Nehisi Coates writes to his son, I wanted you to have your own life, apart from me. I am wounded. I am marked by old codes, which shielded me in one world and then chained me to the next. The idea of the life in the present means something much different than it will mean in the future is the driving force of the narrative. For years, I could never understand why my parents wanted me to have a good education. I always wanted to know what this meant to them. It is here, in Ta-Nehisi's words, the essence of the importance placed on learning. Although, neither of my parents graduated from college, it does not mean that they are by any means uneducated. Every parent wants their offspring to learn, to seek, to wander. And in this process, their aspirations for their children are to find what is important to them and help others on their own journey. Experiences are what shape our identities as human beings. We are not our parents' experiences, they learned different lessons, their greatest hope for us is that we will continue to seek truth. All of this I find in Ta-Nehisi Coates' sentiment to his son.

My mind goes to a conversation I once had with Hendrick Floyd also known as Shiesty Khrist. Floyd is a light-skinned African American man with long hazelnut dreadlocks and an unmistakable laugh. To me, he is Shiesty Khrist, because I knew him as an underground emcee far before I knew him as a person. Probably, one of the humblest emcees I have ever met, Shiesty is a Lexington legend in the hip hop world. His work alongside artists like Cunninlynguists makes a distinction among Lexington music. One day he and I were talking

about what I want to do while I am here in Lexington, Kentucky. I told him I want to leave the place better than I found it. My father taught me this growing up. You clean off the lawnmower after you mow the lawn. You pack up your gear the same way you found it before you start a job. You treat others' property and home as you would want your own treated. My mother instilled this too for its pragmatism. You keep your things organized. You're the type of person that needs structure. A person's home is an extension of their hospitality.

I fail daily to practice this in my life. I'm too busy making plans, to escape. I want to live in a larger city sometimes where the industry for a writer is much more conducive to my career goals. I don't want to help anyone here. I want to make it. Get out, find a good paying job, leave this place I have come to call home. Forget. This is truer for me anywhere I go. I want to leave the place I am, more than find it. My apartment between 5th and 6th streets on Limestone is a refurbished building constructed with reclaimed wood, granite and tile. The pieces create a collage of sorts that remind me of the carpentry I grew up around, this is where my father taught me his own skills. Likewise, inside I have accumulated various handed-down furniture, small appliances and acquired technology to assist me in my own life. Still, I do not own this space. The rent is high, due to the location, and barbed wire, carpet tack strip and installed home security has been installed to shield me from the social climate. I don't own any firearms, nor do I feel them necessary. That is not to say that I am uninhibited when I venture outside of my place. Having been robbed once myself since I've

lived here, it's made me apprehensive to get to know people, or rather divulge too much about my schedule.

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Here, I am, today writing in a small coffee shop called Wild Fig. On the Northside of Lexington, Kentucky Wild Fig is a staple for the neighborhood. One of the few businesses owned by African American business owners, it's more than just another coffee shop. It's an area for conversations, discovery and a sanctuary for intellectual thought. Several smaller bookshelves line the perimeter walls. Three small tables with chairs on either side, a podium with a microphone, and a dark-brown-suede couch sit in the front room. By the window, a couple of taut-brown leather chairs sit on either side of a coffee table surrounded by two book cases with used books. In front of this table are a section of used fiction, graphic novels and new books, included titles from some of Kentucky's own authors. A few little areas beside the front desk and the coffee accoutrements have eclectic socks, coin purses and tiny keepsakes for sale. Behind the front desk is usually where you will find Ron (Crystal's partner in crime) sitting, reading or working from a tablet computer. The coffee bar stands a few feet high at waist level, with a glass cake tray that holds some delicious homemade scones. Another rectangular cube usually has cinnamon rolls lathered with scrumptious cream-cheese icing, below those are various homemade cookies, granola and fresh fruit. One of the baristas, holds a master's degree, works part time at Wild Fig. The other barista is a usually one of Crystal's twin

daughters. Her son and her newborn sit beside her in the kitchen/coffee bar area of the bookstore.

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It is Fall 2013 and I am sitting in Dr. Alan DeSantis' lecture in the Whitehall classroom building. His welcoming expression overshadows his Big Bang Theory, Sheldonesque appearance. He explains the ways in which American culture is a horizontal culture, meaning that instead of learning from the experience of our ancestors, we place emphasis on the collective experience of those around us and within our communities. I have heard this theory expressed in another class, one year prior to his lecture today. An Indian professor with two thumbs on one hand named Dr. Gaur had taught me this similar idea. In India, the culture is also a horizontal one. The collective, horizontal culture, its implications on the way in which society makes an impression on our culture, this is key. It is a key to understanding the North Limestone community in Lexington.

Three years later, I'm at the new Wild Fig coffee shop/bookstore on Eddie Street. Crystal Wilkinson, the owner, and her husband Ron are both working during a Monday afternoon. Mrs. Wilkinson is a kind African American woman from rural Kentucky with a slight under bite. She wears red-rimmed glasses that are stylish, classy. Her salt-and-pepper afro, wide-cheek bones and endearing eyes. She is from rural Kentucky, a small town. Ron, is an African American man

with long dreadlocks, very soft-spoken and a genuine person to get to know. I walk over to the coffee bar and order a medium-sized coffee.

A few moments before Crystal arrives to the shop, I talk to the barista with the master's degree. The barista tells me that she's waiting for something by the way in which her fingers anticipate a text message. I sit by the window in one of the comfortable leather chairs unpacking my gear. A few moments later Crystal arrives and I ask her if she has a few moments to discuss the North Limestone area. Our conversation is brief. I stumble over some questions about gentrification, her novel, being an African American business owner on North Limestone and her vision of the area 20 years from now. Crystal's standing behind the coffee bar as a couple of people talk over-top of us. Her voice and mine are both quiet.

Being from rural Kentucky, she says she writes a lot about this in her new novel. Her concern seems to be about the kids growing up on Eddie Street, which is the street where Wild Fig sits. She tells me she wants her coffee shop and bookstore to really exist for the avid reader. I ask her about the digital versions of books that seem to be in constant competition with the physical copy you can purchase at her place. She makes an interesting comparison to the reemergence of vinyl and cassette tapes for audiophiles. She believes that for people that are avid readers and fans of certain book titles it is still important for them to have the physical copy. I am one of these people almost to a fault. I don't own many digital books, because I'm a purist I suppose when it comes to literature. The

smell of old books, used books, and new books all bring to memory my fondness for going to Hawley-Cooke Bookstore, in Louisville, when I was growing up, or to the local public library. I'm a margin scribbler as well, so I enjoy having the physical copy of a book, for this reason alone. Crystal, attributes her bookstore mostly to having a place within the community for children and their parents to come. She tells me that some of the kids that come in don't even know she's a writer too. I imagine this is her way of staying humble, serving the community and being an example for others.

"I had read some reviews of the Ta-Nehisi Coates book," Ron explains to me a few days later, "the only qualms most people got with him is his inability to cite his sources." I'm impatient to defend Coates' reason for not including footnotes in his latest book *Between the World and Me*. However, instead I listen to Ron's understanding of the criticism Coates most often faces. That being, instead of a true genius, he's just an amalgamation of the literature and figures he grew up learning from in his own household. "You know his parents both with to Howard University," Ron says pointing slightly with an index finger atop the front desk, "they had all of the Malcolm, Cornell West and Sojourner Truth." He hasn't read the memoir yet. I can understand why he might not see how well Coates makes these activists a part of his parents, his own and his son's narrative. I try not to dissuade Ron with too much gushing over a novel about black love, because he might think I'm being a sarcastic or sympathetic numbskull. Sometimes even as intelligent as I like to sound, I can come off

sounding arrogant or somewhat pretentious. “Yeah, well he talks about being in Paris,” I tell Ron in a matter-of-fact tone of voice, “how he noticed that Western thinkers don’t just go to gardens like they do in France.” I already feel like I sound like a pontificating ass as I am saying this. “Yeah, a lot of times American writers, artists and musicians in the black community would go to Europe,” Ron explains to me as it’s described in Coates’ book, “because the idea of racism that exists in America wasn’t there as much.” The barista with the master’s degree interjects, “Well actually, in the book Coates kind of explains that there are Algerian concerns with nationalism more than racism in France during the time period.” Ron and the barista clearly have a much better understanding than I do about the novel now. So, I bow out and listen in silence as I try to learn a little something than be a know-it-all.

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“I shared with him (Coates’, Uncle Ben) a healthy skepticism and a deep belief that we could somehow read our way out,” Ta-Nehisi Coates explains to his son. The idea strikes in me a chord of my own inability to do anything more than write. A desire of every writer is to create an audience of readers. I fall short of this everyday as well. When paying rent on time, worrying about a career outside of grad school, trying to live a healthier lifestyle than I once did is a fear, the idea of owning a business doesn’t seem so bad. But, do I want to just be another entrepreneur on North Limestone to not consider anything other than creating a new culture or the next hip and happening spot? I don’t know, it



seems like that's the answer sometimes: Every one for themselves, only the strong survive, money makes the world go 'round. Crystal kept mentioning when I spoke with her, the need for affordable housing on North Limestone. This is why, I knew I had to talk to Tanya Torp. She could help me understand more about the needs this community of Lexington actually has on a daily basis. Larger problems start to unravel. Questions without answers come to mind: What's the use in talking and organizing if there isn't a cause to live for? Who's making the decisions for us, the working class poor, and what more should I be doing? These are all of the ideas swirling around my head as I meet Tanya at her home, the Justice House. The front lawn is a garden, wild flowers, thick with green luscious wild plants in the summer time. Tanya's husband Christian tends to the garden throughout the year. The Justice House appears like a mirage in the desert of concrete, liquor stores and crack houses. Signs for all sorts of organizations claim their property in the tilled, crumbly dirt. This must be the place where people gather after they read books, a place that is hosting a week for Alternative Spring Breakers from Appalachian State University. I knock on the door at 8m and I'm greeted by the bright-eyed, Tanya Torp.

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## Chapter Four: Radio Waves

I first met Kakie Urch in the Fall of 2014. She was part of a panel discussion addressing police brutality within the African American community. Herself and three to four other people opened the conversation about the recent death of a black male in Ferguson, Missouri. My professor, Frank X Walker had our class attend the discussion. As a part of his film class, *Black Love as Resistance*, I got to know how the black community is being misrepresented in the media. Soon after the discussion which Kakie was a part of, I began to question the role of media in community building. Kakie is a great place to start when I did have questions. At the beginning I took to Twitter to try to understand the role Kakie was playing in the social media arena. I found out her presence was strong and she had many followers within the Lexington community.

While working as a barista at another coffee shop on the Northside, I ask her what she does. "I'm a founder of WRFL, WLXL, WLXU radio stations in Lexington. I also teach at the University of Kentucky school of journalism among several other things," she tells me. Kakie is a middle-aged white lady with blonde hair, a slight overbite, and dark piercing eyes that make me think of Joan Baez for some reason. Her manner of speaking is straightforward-to-the-point. Kakie's one of those type of figures that is trustworthy for the simple fact, she tells everything like it is. This actually got me into trouble with Old School when I had a conversation with him.

"Her and her middle-aged white lady friends might have called the intersection of North Limestone and Sixth street, The Four Corners of the Universe, but you can't tell Old School that, man. He needs the meat-and-potatoes type questions about the neighborhood." John Lackey reminds me after I make a fool of myself to Old School. Old School tells me despite what others may or may not call this area of Lexington, it has and always will be known as 'The Zone'.

"Got it. I'll have to remember that next time I talk to him." I dumbfoundedly explain.

I wish I knew then what I'm figuring out now. As Kakie arrives at Third Street Stuff coffee shop, we wave at one another as I sip a Yerba maté tea. She moves to the counter and is greeted by a barista who seems to be her friend, putting her order in from memory. This coffee shop is all hand-painted with vivid neon colors, little weird nooks to read, and reminds me as something Wayne White designed himself. When Kakie sits down we immediately start talking about social media and its role in the community. Strangely enough, that's on my mind and we settle into conversation about Facebook and Twitter.

"Are we friends on Facebook?" Kakie asks me.

"Yeah, I met you a couple of years ago at the Ferguson panel at UofK, in the Worsham theater," I clarify to her, "you made some interesting points about the relationship between social media and black Twitter in the event of a catastrophe."

"Well that's an excellent place to start, now you said you're working on something about the LCR (Lexington Community Radio), for your thesis, am I correct?"

I say, "Yeah, sort of, I kind of just want to pick your brain about a few things mostly regarding the radio stations you helped found."

From this point forward I sit back and listen while Kakie first tells me about the role of social media within the community. She's a hurricane of wonderful information. Kakie's done a lot of work with the College of Communications at UofK, which is also an interest of mine, having had a Comm. minor when I was in undergrad at UofK. Kakie's describing the roles in which we use social media today in order to communicate within the communities where we live.

"You get on Twitter or Facebook to find out most real-time events anywhere these days," Kakie says, "when the police shot and killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri we all went to Twitter to find out what was going on there."

"We saw people organize via the social media platform," I impart.

A few minutes later Kakie voices the reason she and Debra Hensley got together to found WRFL, WLXL and WLXU. I can see how it directly pertains to the idea of social media in community organization. Debra Hensley is a former councilwoman and founder of the Hope Center in Lexington. Kakie believes the credit goes to Debra for all of her fiscal support of the operation. Along with the

help from Debra's funding efforts, Kakie created WRFL years ago as a part of a need for a local radio station. WRFL is a station that provides tunes you won't always hear on regular radio station's; they actually have dj's that play music their interested in rather than the mainstream Top 40 hits ad nauseam.

"I owe you a radio station," are the words Kakie uses to show me her relationship with Debra. Kakie sits across from me at Third Street Stuff replicating the scene for me the best she can. The work that goes into making a radio station are in the details. She says that the target area for each radio station is based on different demographics of listeners. As I'm listening, I can't help but wonder how a radio station even exists in the age of streaming, podcasting and instantaneous social media news. The logical conclusion I come up with has to do with socioeconomics of the listening fan base. Radio is one of the few media outlets that doesn't charge a fee for listening. Satellite radio aside, the effectiveness of low-power FM stations on the radio, bridge the gap, between broadcasting and audience.

Today, I rarely turn the radio on as often as I did when I was growing up. My listenership has dwindled over the last couple of decades due primarily to the over abundance of commercials. We live in a world where our daily lives are centered around this theme of immediate gratification. Everywhere we go and everything we do in our daily lives consists on expectations we place on technology. How is it then that technology can't be used for positive purposes such as community organization.

Despite this idea, there are more pertinent reasons for having a low-power FM community radio. One of the primary reasons, being safety. A few years ago the Boston Marathon was terrorized by a group of insane individuals. Kakie believes the need for community radio is for instances such as these and other problems facing the community.

I'm an avid runner as of the last few years. Her comment plucks some heartstrings for myself and other runners alike at the mere mention of the Boston Marathon massacre. However, the majority of the time when I run I listen to music with fast BPM's (beats per minute). If a broadcast were to come on the radio about some community distress it's likely I would get a notification from UofK emergency alert system first.

On the other hand, what makes the low-power FM station's alerts important is the large portion of Lexington citizens on the Northside, that are not part of the UofK alert system. As Kakie explains to me, there are three circle of the Venn diagram that show the demographic audience for low-power FM audience base in Lexington. WLXL is the bilingual station for the Latino population. WLXU is designed to be commercial-free, community radio for the Northside of Lexington English-speaking population. Both stations cover a 100-watt range. With both radio stations, Kakie tells me, the idea is to be cost efficient as well as capable of covering a larger area at the same time.

Imagine the old cartoon with the two neighbor's building privacy fences in their backyards. As the one neighbor builds his fence higher, the other

neighbor feels the need to build theirs just a bit higher to cover the deficit. This goes on and on until both of the cartoon characters are up in the sky on ladders, until they forget why they even decided on such a competition in the first place. Eventually, everything falls down under the pressure and instability of the fences they've built to keep the other outside.

LCR (Lexington Community Radio) is taking another approach. The Latino community and English-speaking community both have their own radio stations now. Yet, instead of constructing walls between the two communities, LCR hope to develop a symbiotic relationship through radio waves. The three concentric circles of radio wave coverage. Radio waves are important to the evolution of this low-power FM idea because they start on a Northside community level.

Radio waves from low-power FM stations in Lexington are doing much more than creating an awareness in the community for security purposes. These radio waves discovered by Nikolai Tesla are capable of bringing together areas of the community that might not normally mix. The Latino community and the English-speaking community have a lot more in common than many people recognize.

In Michael Pollan's book, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, he discusses the way in which agriculture bonds the Spanish-speaking and English-speaking cultures in America today. Our culture of corn-eating is directly tied to our relationship to one another. Not too far off topic, but the Latino and English-speaking



community have become too distanced from one another for too long. I believe that, what these low power-FM stations are actually doing is educating and unifying the disparities in this relationship.

Culturally, we need help at times reinforcing the symbiotic relationship between various languages of the world. I don't think there is a much better way to do this than through the universal language of music and food. WLXU and WLXL provide the opportunity to reunite the relationships we share with each other in our homes at the table, as well as outside within the community.

Through the time and energy provided by two Lexington visionaries, Kakie Urch and Debra Hensley, we are reminded of this imperative goal. First, low-power FM stations can be a positive catalyst for social change within the Spanish-speaking and English-speaking communities. And, radio waves merge the cultural differences of language to create a harmonious melody of love.

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## Chapter Five: Angles of the Universal Language

"It's constantly changing – the vibe, the music, the environment," David Chill Napier explains to me, of the Lexington music scene. By this point in our conversation, my friend Chill, is already on the same page as me. We're sitting outside of the Lexington Diner after a late lunch. Sunshine illuminates the block, but where we are shade from the various buildings on Short Street keeps us cool.

We met today for a special menu item at Lexington Diner, called the Landlover's Po'Boy. The entree consists of a fresh, sourdough-baguette roll, two or three pieces of cornmeal-fried oyster and a side of triangular-shaped home-fry potatoes. As we eat I wax poetic about the remoulade. Every good Po'Boy sandwich needs a good remoulade, in my opinion. After we finish devouring our lunch, Chill and I decide to sit down and talk about the music scene in Lexington, local venues and his own humble beginnings as a musician.

I've made it a point throughout my writing career to get to know lots of musicians. All of them speak the universal language of music that often gets lost in translation, when their artistry is put in one or another spoken language. Yet, the draw for musicians as artists is creating the language of the music itself to reach a wide variety of audiences. When Chill plays he bounces back and forth. He smiles, singing from a place that is as comfortable to him as a jam session at his friend's house.

It's often been said by my mentor, Erik Reece, "Writing is a lonely profession." The crowd at a music show gives the musician feedback

instantaneously. This gives musicians a unique perspective on the community, culture and art form. What I'll later describe to Chill, is the audience's energetic-investment, when they hear artists like himself; or the Driftwood Gypsies, the Baja Yetis, Warren Byrom and the Fabled Canelands, Shiesty Khrist, Ancient Warfare or Ford Theatre Reunion, play is a recognizing the scenery around them. Of the musicians aforementioned, I've had the great luxury of getting to know a couple of them on a first name basis. Warren Byrom and Chill are the two of the several that I know and they know me.

Really, I'm very fortunate to live on the Northside of Lexington, because this is the place where the majority of these bands get their start. A local venue known as Al's Bar is a few doors down from my place, so I get the opportunity to watch several of these musicians grow and gain notoriety. Warren, I met a few years ago around 2013, through mutual friends. And Chill I met while working as a barista at a local coffee shop, where we were both coworkers.

One of the most memorable time I spent with Warren was a couple of years ago in 2014. He called me one morning and asked if I had ever been to the Pinnacles in Berea, Kentucky. I had not. We decided to take a trip together. On the way Warren stopped at a guitar shop in Richmond called Currier's in Richmond, Kentucky. He needed to get one of his guitars fixed, so we made the pit-stop on our way to the mountains.

Currier's is a guitar shop that fits into the ordinary small town architecture with the familiarity of many towns in Kentucky. As I walked inside I noticed a

small synth from the late 70s that caught my attention. I began playing with the instrument while Warren took care of business with the guitar repairwomen. Before we left, Warren decided to join me messing with the small synth instrument. Four, small-square buttons made simple tonal sounds that allow the player to produce a loop of the sounds. I never was a great musician, having only experience playing xylophones, clarinet and a few chords on guitar—I thought I better leave it to the real musician. Warren on the other hand, has a knack for picking up just about any instrument and making it sound like he knows its soul. He began pressing the synth buttons and creating this Life Aquaticesque beat right away. I imagined him with a scuba helmet on, earbuds inside the helmet, jamming away underwater on his way to find the jaguar shark that ate his best friend (a la Steve Zissou).

Something I have always wanted to know is how some musicians are able to do this with an instrument they use. Detect the soul within the instrument itself. I have seen it time again while watching my friends practice. Or, professionals playing in public, they seem to know the language they can make with the instrument.

Later in the day, after the brief errand to Currier's, Warren takes me in his deep purple van to the Pinnacles in Berea. We hike for thirty minutes or so up the trail to Indian Fort Theater. The trail begins with a steep incline nearly ninety degrees up the side of the mountain. I'm out of breath by the first ten minutes. As we're hiking I ask Warren if he knows whether or not the campground used to

have an arts and crafts fair. He isn't sure. I'm absorbed in the stretch of road that came before the trailhead. A long path with rows of trees and woods separates the parking lot from the mountains.

As a kid, I remember my grandmother used to take me to arts and crafts fairs, where she had several items for sale, they took place out in the woods just like these. The reminiscent landscape brought back several vivid memories of her to me as we hiked. I followed Warren not talking, just thinking. The lulls in conversation hold a great deal of information. For Warren, he would call me when he was going through bouts of depression, a break-up or a generally rough patch in his life. Likewise, I often called him when I thought about the passing of both of my grandparents eight months apart, a heartbreak and difficulty with my writing. There have been difficult times to process the heavy memories of the past for both of us, but we lean on each other.

Likewise, Chill has become one of my best musician friends in Lexington. We worked together at the coffee shop near my house for a short time. Instantly, we became fast friends making music in the kitchen with the water sprayer used to clean dishes, pots and pans, and various other household instruments we could make sounds with while finishing our shifts. Chill's always got a sense that better things are on the horizon. When he laughs it always makes me smile.

When we're talking at the Lexington Diner he says, "My mom is the reason I'm a singer. Her and my grandfather were my musical influences growing up. I used to play this record game, at my granddad's record store when

I was a kid. It was this old three-cherry slot machine game from the fifties he acquired. You could win records playing the game. This is where I used to listen to a lot of vinyl and learn about his time with the Chitlin' Circuit."

I don't know much about the Chitlin' Circuit other than what the interwebs tell me. My memory isn't too good, but I do recall hearing about it years ago in music classes. The Chitlin' Circuit is the route of several jazz and blues singers back in the early days before rock-n-roll began. Musicians went to various juke joints, speakeasy's and cotton clubs to perform for a primarily African American audience. The idea was to have an underground music scene that had influence on many of the mainstream artists of the time.

Having a chance to play in a few bands in high school and early college, Chill found his niche. He met and began working with Ron Browning – of Nashville, Tennessee fame – and was mentored by him as his vocal coach. Chill learned to hone his skill as a singer from this masterful artist, and has stayed in touch with him over the years. I worked with Chill for a while before I really knew he had a set of pipes. The first time I heard his voice at Cosmic Charlie's in 2014, I was astounded by his mellow, silky-smooth rendition of Stevie Wonder's catalogue.

As Warren and I sat atop the Pinnacles in Berea, Kentucky he rarely spoke of the music that gives him so much purpose. Instead, the quiet serene sounds of birds and insects played songs for us. I looked down below Warren and my own

vantage point to discover the Indian Fort Theater. A small overhang with a bare dirt floor that appeared to be a stage came into view.

"Could you imagine playing a small intimate show out here in the woods?" I asked Warren.

Warren paused and responded after a few seconds, "I've thought about it, but the logistics of getting electricity and good sound probably would be difficult to manage."

I believe Warren likes to come out here to these woods to clear his head. He was showing me, what was a spiritual place for him. Indian Fort Theater is a thinking spot. Several thirty-foot boulders and cliffs surround the natural theater. You can sit atop them and forget a society exists much less than a short drive from Lexington. The immersion of downtown is far away from imagination when you're enclosed by so much life in the woods.

I'm pensive while Chill's explaining the other festival venues his band's played over the last few months. He's expressing to me the life of festival's in the rural landscape, and I'm recollecting the encounters I've made with Warren. Chill's band the Driftwood Gypsy's, he says, is comprised of musicians that don't play chords or notes. Instead they play to the soul or the emotions of the music. While his other band the Baja Yeti's, are a band of older musicians that like structure. The structure in this case is progression, scale and collaboration.

While we're talking Chill reaffirms the idea that he values both structure and improvisation. He teaches music students of all ages how to play. He tells

me they learn the structure of music and how to read notes, but rarely does he teach them to improvise. That's something they learn on their own by playing with others.

"I teach them how to feel the music they're playing," Chill conveys to me.

I can comprehend this much the same for Warren. Most of his music has a nostalgia about it, meant to evoke a certain emotional connection for his listener. Music is after all the universal language used to bridge the gap between language and culture. Chill agrees that music is the binary force that closes the disparity between art and people. Chill and Warren both approach music from different angles. And still, they both have fans that hear what they're playing rather than just listen to their music.

To illustrate my point, there's a funny line from the movie *White Men Can't Jump*. Wesley Snipes' character is explaining to Woody Harrelson's character, "You listen to Gladys Knight and the Pips, but you can't hear them." Granted the context of the line is that white people can't feel black music, the point is, Warren and Chill both give everyone music they can hear or feel as the case may be.

Our energetic-investment as an audience allows us to relate to the angle of approach a musician takes. The Northside of Lexington is a highly energetic area where music comes from every direction. Al's Bar, I would say, houses the most unique venue on the Northside.



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## Chapter Six: Homegrown Press

“You tell Erik; Nanna thinks the world of him!” Nanna tells me when I walk into the Homegrown Press. A couple of ladies are inside talking to John Lackey today. They’re purchasing some prints. After they buy what they came for, they leave with the jingle of a few small bells attached to the glass door of the studio. Soon thereafter a dog named Kaya, which mean marijuana, comes inside the art studio with Scot Ward. The dog wears a red, Emotional Support vest. Scot tells me she’s 11 years old, a husky/Labrador mix also known as a huskador. John Lackey, the owner, artist and North Limestone visionary is working on a painting he needs to be finished tonight. It’s a Pine Mountain settlement painting for the Kentucky Land Trust event hosted by Erik Reece and several other Kentucky artists. Scot is here in the studio today to talk with Lackey about commissioning a work of art for his hike. He’s wearing a blue bubble-goose vest, Vibram five-finger shoes and black nylon hiking pants; a weathered traveler with a wiry black goatee, a grin like a distrustful pirate studies me as I make record of him. Homegrown Press is usually not this busy, but like all days when work needs to get done immediately, people show up.

“I’m hiking the Lakes to Ocean Trail or LOT for short,” Scot Ward tells Lackey and me, “it’s to promote eco-tourism and Relay for Life.” Scot’s an avid adventure seeker, pioneer, author and Sherpa of sorts. Another man with the hiker is wearing an orange hat, red rain jacket, khaki pants and worn leather shoes. His name is also John. His leathered complexion and mannerisms remind

me of an older version of Hunter S. Thompson. I like to smoke a lot of weed, or something to this affect comes cackling out of John's mouth as we're talking about Kaya. The dog finds a spot to rest on the ground while Scot talks to Lackey about his vision for a painting. "Culture is drawn to you," Scot explains about his life on the trails. He's been to almost every state, hiked everywhere and has heard a lot of stories. While Scot tells Lackey his ideas, the paint brush and easel sit impatiently in the background, waiting to be completed. If there were those Donny Darko chest-wormholes in real life, Lackey's would be moving toward the easel while Scot's rambling his pitch. Scot sits on a stool beside the mural wall in the studio. Feet dangling from the stool, he explains the journey he is on that began in Chicago, Illinois.

Lackey's dabbing his brush in some paint piled high on his palette. Thick sitting in a glob of evergreen, burnt orange, sky blue, thistle brown, lycan grey, sunset purple, are the various colors he uses to finish the painting. He steps aside the painting while Scot continues to make his case for Lackey to paint a portrait of his journey. At some point he might be able to create something for Scot. "I'm thinking about a portrait of the mountains, with maybe me in the foreground cast in a shadow," Scot says, "something that really gives my supporters an idea of the hike." I shake my head laughing under my breath at Lackey nodding along as Scot continues to spin him a tale. Not long after Scot's pitch Lackey tells him, "I got a lot of work right now, but I would be interested in working on something when I have a few minutes. At the moment I've got to get this

painting done for a show tonight, an album cover for the Wooks and finish a broadside for my friend's poem." I feel connected to his art, because my own reflects what he's working on currently at Homegrown Press. The broadside for the poem is for Erik Reece, my mentor. The album cover is for my friend, Arthur Hancock's band the Wooks and the painting is for the Kentucky Land Trust Show tonight with several of my contemporaries.

After Scot exchanges information with Lackey he leaves quietly with Kaya and John (his associate) leaving nothing more than some boisterous storytelling in his wake. Lackey begins cleaning his brushes in the side bathroom. Warren Byrom and the Fabled Canelands plays over the speaker upstairs. Warren's been a friend of mine for few years. He's a part of the show tonight at the fundraiser for Kentucky Land Trust. "Nickel and Dime" plays through the sound-system. A painting of Pine Mountain Lackey's working on sits beside a resting acoustic guitar like a six-shooter in the holster. A brief interaction with Old School happens. Old School is a neighborhood homeless man, an African American in his old age, wise to the streets, guardian of the block.

He comes in and talks with John and I for a minute then takes off again. I piss him off with a question about the "four corners of the universe". The "four corners of the universe" used to mean the intersection of 6th street and North Limestone to some college kids. You had Al's Bar, the liquor store, the bodega and Spalding's Doughnuts. It was everything a college kid needed. Old School tells me, "the four corners of the universe?!?! That's the world man, that is the

four corners of the universe. Ain't no four corners of the universe no more. This is and always has been the Zone!" I'm really confused and I think in some way may have really pissed off Old School. I can tell I said something wrong and John explains to me that Old School doesn't like metaphorical questions about his neighborhood. He's lived here his whole life in the Zone and to him now I seem like just another outsider trying to be down.

Outside it's sunny but very cool. the jazz music from Homegrown Press keeps my pen bouncing and the painting of Pine Mountain nearing its completion. John's moving back and forth checking the perspective of his painting. I'm sitting in a green leather, wooden, swivel-chair beside the water cooler. The red foldout chair Old School was sitting in stares at me like a bandaged-up war veteran. Black duct tape seals the wounds of aged vinyl. It's hard not to be inspired sitting in Homegrown Press. All of the wonderful paintings smile, laugh, dance all around the room. Everything here has its own character, like the wooden stove with a painting of a stage curtain at the arch of its ceiling. Or the wooden stage that I watched John and a friend of his building last summer. Each plank is crafted by hand and sanded-smooth to perfection. The newest poem by Erik Reece with a broadside by Lackey lays on a desktop up the stairs from the gallery.

John tells me a story about some music playing. He says when Joan Baez had Bob Dylan on her tour with her, she was the biggest deal in the music folk scene. They go back to the place where they're staying after a show and she has this

great place to stay. Meanwhile, Bob Dylan has to stay in a shanty little room that isn't much. Dylan wrote the song "When the Ship Comes In" as a tribute to this experience. John tells me this pretending to be Bob Dylan kicking his leg in the air as if it were Dylan's own foot up someone's ass. I laugh and pretend to have heard the song. Some moments later I step outside to YouTube the song and share it on social media.

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## Chapter Seven: Justice House

Early morning glow from the sun, showers the dining room of Tanya Torp's home. She stands in the kitchen mixing a large stainless steel bowl of pancake mix. A few other friends prepare the kitchen space with dozens of plates, coffee cups and rolled silverware. There's a positive energy in the space you can feel when you walk into the dining area. People you may or may not know greet you when you come inside the room. There is laughter, people smiling, an agreeable air that hovers above the heads of everyone. You can sense that everyone that attends the Heinz Breakfast each month wants to be a part of the conversation, rather than just a casual acquaintance.

"I often say that we're not pretentious enough to name our own home," Tanya laughs as she explains how her home got its name, "someone else named it."

Upon a friend's suggestion to name their home the Justice House, due to Tanya and her husband's work within the community, the name stuck.

I met Tanya a couple of years ago when I was invited to her home, the Justice House, for one of the Heinz Breakfast's that happens each month. My initial interpretation of her operation was that she was part of some kind of nonprofit organization for community development, though I didn't really know what her mission was. Really, it's much more multi-faceted than another nonprofit working with the community. For Tanya Torp and her husband, Christian, their home is a lifelong dedication of love, kindness, tolerance and patience. I admire them both from the moment I meet them.

In the summer of 2015 I walk up the path to the Justice House, I see Christian outside, tending to the garden out front, green and alive with various sections of vegetables, he smiles and says hello. I smile back, not knowing who he is, and continue up the stairs to their home. When I knock on the door, I can hear someone's voice on the other side of the door, saying, come on in it's open! All sorts of new faces are standing in the corridor and against the threshold of the main dining room. To my right are dozens of coffee cups, a water urn filled with ice and sweating cool clean water. A steel percolator sits beside the water with an illuminated ruby red light suggesting the coffee is fresh and ready to go. I grab myself a cup and inhale the smell of fresh buttermilk pancake batter, pancakes on the stove, quiche in the oven. A tall, slender older man with wiry silver hair and spectacles sits reading the paper. A woman with curly, dirty-blonde hair stands next to Tanya talking about the new projects Kentuckians for the Commonwealth are doing. The woman's name, I find out later is Beth, she's an ambassador or a liaison for this organization. People made this, they came early and cooked, prepared the breakfast themselves.

I first heard about Kentuckians for the Commonwealth at a Jim James, Daniel Martin Moore and Ben Sollee show at the Brown Theatre in Louisville in 2011. The concert was a benefit for the organization's involvement to stop mountain top removal in rural Kentucky coal mining towns. Those coal mining towns are similar to a town my grandparents came from called Harlan, Kentucky. Ben Sollee and Daniel Martin Moore played title tracks from their



album *Dear Companion*. Sollee's cello serenaded an audience of potential donors to KFTC, while Moore crooned lyrics in his soft-amiable voice. The crowd applauded each song and waited impatiently to hear Jim James. The front man of *My Morning Jacket* sang a few songs from his forthcoming album *Regions of Light and Sound of God*. James alluded to the desire for this evening audience to reach through the mirrored-monolith of ourselves to another side of existence beyond the tangentially unorganized one we're familiar with everyday. I think he meant that he wanted us to organize and get involved in our communities. A bearded-man came out during the hootenanny to dance on a large piece of plywood with hard-soled shoes. The show is as much about culture as it is about recreating the scenes from rural Kentucky, the place where mountain-top removal is prevalent.

The coal company's move in, promise economic growth, take all the coal they can then leave the residents with the destruction in the wake of something called, progress. This happens all of the time in Kentucky and most of the reason it continues to happen is for the reason of lack of educating the citizens about the environmental impact that occurs after the mountain tops are severed from the land. Water, erosion and climate are all effected as a result of this horrific practice.

I went to the concert to support the cause and help raise awareness of these practices, in the name of cheap energy. Also, these three musicians are some of the best social advocates we have as Kentuckians, that recognize the importance

of changing the world in an organic way. It just so happens, that until now I am unaware how much work and money goes into keeping such an organization afloat. Beth and Tanya are major reasons why the Kentuckians for the Commonwealth continues to defy the interests of King Coal.

Back to breakfast, every one gathered today at the Justice House, listens to a guy explain how his activism got him arrested. The powers that be placed him behind bars after protesting mountaintop removal. He's in his late twenties, probably, with dark hair somewhat heavy-set, a shaggy beard and smudged glasses. He's telling a story about the time he was arrested in Washington, D.C. protesting voter registration practices as draconian as the laws large corporations use to evade taxation. Let's call the man Wes, because I don't know his name and for the sake of keeping his identity anonymous. Wes, says that many criminals with non-violent crimes are still being excluded from voting in important elections. Not only do they not get a chance to vote, but several of them continue to be incarcerated for possession, trafficking and harvesting marijuana. It seems to me that at some point (aside from Matt Bevin's attempts to pardon his cronies with felonies) the war against drugs and keep these criminals from voting in elections has to be deemed a wash. Wes is fighting on the front-lines for these sorts of rights or death of rights in the nation's capital. People that have never met Wes before, yet feel the backlash of these sorts of moot laws, will someday be allowed to voice their opinion again in elections. Until then, Wes will be

arrested with handcuffs, citations, but not silenced for his cause like many other causes worth standing up for are the reason he keeps coming back.

In 2013, I went to D.C. on a trip with the University of Kentucky Alternative Spring Break program. Today, some three years later, Tanya Torp hosts another kind of ASB program theme with Appalachian State University. The students are all staying at her home, the Justice House. Tanya and I sat down for a while one morning in the Spring of 2016 to discuss what exactly, it is, that she does. For her and her husband Christian it's not as much about what they do, as it is how they do what they do. To me Tanya and Christian are two of the most lovable advocates for social awareness on the Northside of Lexington.

Tanya takes a bite of her morning omelet with fresh veggies suspended within, their juices running around the perimeter of the plate with each forked-slice. She says, "Christian developed a relationship with the little bodega across the road," taking a sip of coffee, "he buys bologna and whatnot, they let him bring in free produce for the community." Sure enough, when I went into the bodega before meeting Tanya this morning I saw the little area with produce that her husband brings into the shop. A sign like a puppy or kitten adoption, sits atop the vegetables. "We're cognizant of the fact that we don't want this place to be a soup kitchen," Tanya explains to me while I'm sitting leaned forward checking the light on my recording. "We want to build community, so that anyone feels welcomed here." Some of the students on the ASB trip to Lexington, start wondering into the kitchen around 8:30am, looking half-asleep. It occurs to

me that Tanya represents much more than a leader or an ambassador. Behind her genuine smile, tired eyes are the soul of a dreamer, a visionary, a passionate human being. "One in six Kentuckians goes to bed hungry at night," Tanya tells me when I asked her about her mission. She says her and her husband came to Kentucky to spread the gospel, but shortly realized that people here have the gospel. To Tanya, her initial mission seemed arrogant, because the people on the Northside still had an understanding of the word of God. Despite there being crime reported in the area, there is still crime in affluent areas of Lexington, which is seldom reported in official surveying. I always wonder, why then does the Northside get so much grief for being a rough area of town? It seems that after speaking with Tanya I get a better understanding as to why this is a paradox. The residents tell her it all comes back to this idea of the area being what Tanya refers to as a food desert. The lack of fresh fruits and vegetables, a local market and accessible food seem to be the major problem. Many of us may think that hunger surely can't be the main problem, but it is a basic human necessity. I can see how hunger and homelessness attribute to many of the other problems facing this community.

"Maria and Nacho are a third generation Latino family, that live in the stone house across the street," Tanya explains, "we'll take them over fresh peppers and they'll make us soup, it's this community thing. It's all about community and about dignity. So people will come over and get groceries or get produce. They're picking it and helping tend the garden too." This idea has

made a huge impact on the neighborhood around Tanya's home. From 2013-2014, I spent my life without reliable transportation. So I rode my bike, took the Lex Tran, relied on friends for rides. What I didn't realize at the time was how insanely inconvenient the public transport is in Lexington. I might spend thirty minutes or so driving in a car to get groceries and bring them back home. Whereas, you can't really do that on a bike and get what you need. Or, you might spend two hours out of your day waiting on a bus, riding it to the store, getting your groceries, waiting again for the bus and finally getting back home. Having firsthand experience with the struggle of getting food and supplies to my home was such a pain. Thankfully, Tanya and Christian are doing something about this, sadly though sometimes this goes unnoticed. Call this then, part of my own mission. I want to revitalize the idea of people power back into the conversation with our own communities. The fact is the Northside of Lexington is not the only community that deals with crime, hunger, homelessness, transportation issues or voting rights. Tanya further emphasizes bringing voter registration to the helm of our conversation. "185,00 people have been disenfranchised just because they have a felony on their record," Tanya with fierce determination says, "Janet Tucker (of KFTC) says she met a man that had stole a TV when he was eighteen. He was in his thirties or forties and still had never been allowed to vote." KFTC is all about uncovering the small truth within the lie. The lie here is that people in the communities don't care, are not involved or just plain can't understand the problems beyond their current situations.

KFTC began to realize how purposeful that is to keep felons from voting, the insidiousness of the law and how they must make an amendment to this arcane law. Famous members like Wendell Berry have helped KFTC to fight with the Northside of Lexington and other rural areas of Kentucky to preserve clean water. These are all big problems that every community deals with on a daily, weekly, yearly basis. People power is what KFTC, the Justice House and Tanya Torp are about as members of the Lexington community. "The fact is that when you talk about gentrification, we're not talking about the re-gentrification. This ain't the first time that people have been displaced," Tanya says. In twenty years from now, Tanya thinks we'll be talking about the re-gentrification of the Northside once again. She tells me that we don't have time to rest on our laurels, we need more writers like Wendell Berry, Crystal Wilkinson, Bianca Spriggs. The call to action and the indelible requirement to use the voice I have and you have is of maximum importance.

I can't help but feel a sense of urgency and a desire to be more involved. Yet, I still feel like it's all for naught at times. If the community is just going to be re-gentrified over and over again, there's a lack of food, places to live with affordable space, reliable transportation---then, why even try at all? I can hear the same words echoed in the Ben Sollee song, *Only a Song*. He laments, This is only a song, it can't change the world. I'm amused by Sollee's skepticism, but also guilty of not doing more to dispute this very distrust. If there is one person, I can trust it is Tanya. I believe in her. However, she is just one person and she cannot

do everything alone, nor claims to. This idea of people power, organizing for the sake of community, shapes and molds my aspirations. People have told me for years that I have a lot of potential, but that means nothing without some form of action. As Tanya told me, we can't rest on what we know. I'm only one voice, but I'm working with a whole lot of other voices, perhaps to create an ensemble, a collection of who's who on the Northside of Lexington. Maybe it will all mean more one day than just some words in collision on a few pages. I hope so, but for now there is still a lot more work to do. I can't let Tanya, Crystal or Kiptoo do all of the hard labor and expect to reap the benefits from their stories. One day all of our stories may be what helps future generations to stop believing the small truth within the lie. The truth is all of us people together have the power to make extraordinary differences in the lives of people that don't even know us. The Northside is waiting.

#### Kentuckians for the Commonwealth

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After breakfast, every one gathered today at the Justice House, during the humid summer day of 2015 a few blocks from my home,

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## Chapter Eight: Running for Lives

A little over a year ago, a group of fellow students and myself were instructed to write a letter to ourselves, while we were in Washington, D.C. The prompt given to us was: "How did you feel the last time you saw a homeless person?" And, "What will you do the next time you see a homeless person?" I wrote a letter to myself that answered the question, as a challenge to myself. To the first question on March 11th, 2013 I said, I felt as if they were me. On March 14th, 2013 I told myself: The next time I see a homeless person, I will look at them and talk to them. Now, I say that these answers were a challenge to myself, because I have been there and I have experienced homelessness firsthand. How I look at this experience, living at my grandparent's home with my family is not without a silver lining. Everything that happened in my life, whether positive or negative, has allowed me to help someone else. It would be an epic disservice to my late grandparent's, if I did not help anyone else as they helped my family years ago. The second challenge to myself was an answer with a rhetorical question. I'll look at a homeless person, and talk to them? Acknowledgment, is one of the main insecurities people on the street face every single day. People that do not pay attention to homeless people, just don't think it could happen to them.

Especially in the nation's-capital, there is a large disparity between who is and who is not without a home. Washington, D.C. is an interesting city with exponential amounts of historical relevance everywhere you turn. The Potomac

River winds alongside the city, where skyscrapers are all kept a certain height, observing the building-code. Streets are well kept with several congregations of homeless people beneath viaducts like lost-and-found items. It was my first time in D.C. This is where I would meet Josh Nadzam for the first time. As a fellow student, he worked on his Masters in Social Work, and I'm a non-traditional student who worked on my undergraduate Bachelor's degree in English. The variation of career paths interested me and when we joined forces with other learning disciplines, there was no telling what we would learn. Our group of Alternative-Spring-Breakers led by the Youth Service Opportunities Project or YSOP, got a chance to observe and understand poverty. We were led to small initiatives that were often-funded by Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. Each opportunity throughout the week was a chance to understand all of the facets to non-profit organizations. These smaller initiatives were often part of much larger initiatives.

Josh Nadzam, is a former University of Kentucky track and field runner. He is a wiry, bright-eyed man with a smile that makes everyone want to return it without a second thought. Every morning he gets up early and takes a jog, rain or shine, as if he is indebted to the athletic gods. His sense of humor is uncanny and he is seldom without rule 62 in his handbook. He loves to eat trail mix, and pretends to be naïve. Josh's naiveté is offset by an awareness of self; not-like many people you meet every day. It seems like he always has other people in mind no matter where he is or what he is doing. He talks about living, as if he

were Morgan Freeman in *The Shawshank Redemption*. Nadzam poses metaphorical-conundrums like the “Conveyor-Belt-to-Death” analogy. This analogy is one with which we are all subconsciously-familiar. We wake up, work, go to bed then repeat. We go to school, get a job, meet a spouse, have kids, collect retirement and fade subtly to death. His desire is to start his own replication of the Manchester Bidwell Initiative here in Kentucky, which will show others how to get involved.

Manchester Bidwell Project was founded by Bill Strickland in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania where Josh Nadzam was raised. Strickland wrote a book called, *Making the Impossible Possible*. He was also a contributor to the documentary, *Waiting for Superman*. Bill Strickland has a Ted Talk as well, called *Rebuilding a Neighborhood with Beauty, Dignity and Hope*. One can easily understand that Bill Strickland has dedicated his life to helping others. He’s a middle-aged, African American man with a gentility in his voice when he speaks. His gestures are conscientious and his mannerisms are kind-hearted. When he speaks to an audience he reserves welcoming hand gestures that make a person feel appreciated and welcomed. Strickland’s eyes are not unlike Josh’s, in that they have a deep sincerity attached to them like an indebted-philosopher. Both of these people are likable human beings, which are endearingly-capable of great leaps for humanity. As I watched *Waiting for Superman*, I could not help from being immediately interested in what Bill Strickland discussed. He talked about the education system and prison as metaphors for life and death. Strickland used

statistical information like keeping someone in prison is exponentially more expensive than educating someone. Yet, our prison system is over-crowded with criminals that stay in the system. This is not a mystery. This is not a made-up statistic intended to fatten his pockets, while the trickle-down economic model rarely reaches the individuals he helped. He is a human being dedicated to human beings, and their survival for the future. Strickland made his Manchester Bidwell Center to help poor people recognize their potential.

Rebuilding a Neighborhood with Beauty, Dignity and Hope is a Ted Talk orated by Bill Strickland, where he tells and shows how he did what he did, with Manchester Bidwell in Pittsburgh. Herbie Hancock accompanied him with a subtle piano in the background, which added another layer to Strickland's character. Strickland talked about how Manchester Bidwell is an initiative he started to combat the societal plagues of poverty, lack of education, lack of vocation, artistic decline and hopelessness. The center was founded to help at-risk-youth and adult learners develop skills, desirable to a variety of organizations. Instead of watching these poor people get trapped in this societal plague of prison, addiction or death; Strickland, chose to develop a system that could watch them bloom. Manchester Bidwell incorporated beautiful learning environments with gourmet nutrition and mentorships, which mold people into prosperous denizens of hope. All he did was; he chose to see what these poor people for so long had abandoned. Belief in themselves and their future, is their lost dreams. This was something that Bill Strickland returned to their vision.

Strickland's mantras simply stated, "You have to look like the solution, not the problem, if you want to help those who have been given up on", he explained to the audience of his Ted Talk. Strickland had a Japanese, furniture-designer hand carves furniture for his Manchester Bidwell in Pittsburgh, to give the environment dignity. He wanted to approach poverty-stricken communities with an awareness of their potential, to relinquish their manifestations of self as undesirable. His development of the Manchester Bidwell Center allowed poor people to feel as welcomed as wealthy people. When someone walks into Bill Strickland's Manchester Bidwell, they don't know who it is intended for, or how it could be such a beautiful place to develop people. The development of people into human beings again, is seen at the heart of Bill Strickland's discourse. He made sure everyone felt welcomed, when they walked into the Manchester Bidwell Center. Strickland used an age-old adage, "You have to change the way people see themselves before you can change their behavior", and it was apparent how he did it.

Manchester Bidwell is a center dedicated to the many people that gave up on dreams. Josh looks at replicating this initiative in Lexington, Kentucky as a dream he will not give up on, because Bill Strickland never gave up on his own dream. I think it's easy to get frustrated when you have such an epic, transformational dream like Josh's. There are a lot of people that would say this is a waste of time and money. These poor people are never going to change. I spoke with Josh after he started on his own Manchester Bidwell Replication

Project. This is a person I met randomly at an extracurricular event, which has made an impact on me as a human being. I thought to myself, he must be worth the conversation about this initiative he's started. As Josh was drawn to Bill Strickland in an admiration that transcended just mentorship, I was drawn to Josh Nadzam as somewhat of a fanatic. As human beings, who could ever dislike the story of an underdog?

Josh Nadzam's background, is the best proponent for this storyline of the underdog. He grows up in Pittsburgh, in a single-parent household. His mother is one of his heroes. She raises him to believe in himself and never give up on his dreams. Josh's father is not around during the vital years of his life. His mother must keep him on the right track, and that she does. Nadzam, discovers a love for track and field in High School and is one of the top runners in the state. He is awarded an athletic scholarship to run track and field for the University of Kentucky. He stays away from drinking and drugs, because his experiences with losing friends teaches him valuable lessons. As Josh Nadzam continues to develop at the University of Kentucky, he learns the value of social work. He continues to make excellent grades and holds onto his scholarship. The neighborhood he grows up in in Pittsburgh is home to a high school without AP classes. Here, at the University of Kentucky Josh begins to see opportunity. He gets accepted to Graduate School to further develop his degree in Social Work. He meets Dr. Cook-Craig, an Associate Professor of Social Work at the University of Kentucky. Dr. Cook-Craig teaches this young man and he presents

next-level questions to her, which baffle her. She becomes one of his influences and he shares his love for Bill Strickland with her. Josh goes on Alternative Spring Break to Washington, D.C., and he and I meet. He tells me about Strickland and this initiative he's working on bringing to Lexington, while he's still in Grad School at the University of Kentucky. I think he's just a bright-eyed kid with a lot of dreams. Over the next year, Josh works tirelessly to make this dream into a reality. I see him in the coffee shop over the summer of 2013, working with supporters of his Manchester Bidwell Replication Project. I think maybe there is something to this kid. I start to believe he really is starting a transformative-organization here in Lexington. If he is starting a Manchester Bidwell Replication Project, maybe there is some way I can help him?

What began as a story about homelessness and poverty, has developed into a composite of Josh Nadzam and his dream. He has the underdog story as a part of his personal life. Maybe this is his main reason for wanting to help so many. I know for myself, I never wanted to tell anyone about living with my grandparent's, when I was living with them. I was embarrassed and afraid of who I was. People like Nadzam are a rare breed. As Strickland turned this perspective for how the poor view themselves topsy-turvy, so has Nadzam for people like me. He has made me realize that my suffering, can be used as a motivator to help others, like he does. I wanted to know how he did it, so I asked him. He talked about everything from: kids from poor families; to, the Manchester Bidwell Replication Project awareness; to, running from Lexington-



to-Frankfort for Domestic Violence against Women; to, the conveyor-belt-to-death analogy; to, mentorships; and, the feasibility study getting started for his dream to become a reality. I also talked with a former professor of his, Dr. Patty Cook-Craig. As Dr. Cook-Craig, would say: "Josh is an athlete, he's a runner. And, he strikes me as the kind of person who's constantly sprinting and running a marathon." I had no idea until I spoke with him about his replication project, how fast he is. He may be the fastest kid alive. I call him a kid in infinite jest, because he is a man with a childish enthusiasm that cannot be crushed. As I sat with him at Third Street Stuff Coffee Shop here in Lexington, Kentucky he explained to me, poverty-versus-wealth from a social worker's perspective. He contends that kids in poverty are often given the second-hand things at the schools they attend.

Josh explains, "The kid in poverty who is going to some public school, that's probably strapped for funds and falling apart; the message is internalized that you're not worth what this wealthy kid is experiencing." His objection to this thought pattern is presented like a puzzle. He knows that funding is a problem in the education system: "How can I handle this with the lowest cost? Which you kind of do with business anyways, but you wouldn't treat people who weren't poor with the same approach." This is his counter-argument for understanding the education of people with a lack of resources. His idea with the Manchester Bidwell Replication Initiative is, to have people come to this beautiful facility and it help them to value themselves. The nicer facility the more they care about

themselves, than in a run-down place that doesn't care. "That's the unfortunate thing about poverty, anywhere you go it's often the same story, different faces, and different names." Nadzam told me, this is how he understands the paradox of funding and educating at-risk-youth and adult-learners alike.

Dr. Cook-Craig made an interesting point about Josh while he was at the University of Kentucky saying, "He (Josh) is like a sponge. You have the students in class who say: let me do what I need to get through in order to do what I need to in this class. Then you have the students that are like: I'm going to take this opportunity to learn what I can to be able to use it to make something happen." Her insight about him was often brought back to his ability to draw from personal experience. Josh's story is no different than many of these kids in poverty that face heart-breaking obstacles. Dr. Cook-Craig knows where he came from and where he is today. The fact is that people like her mentoring him and helping him, is the reason he excelled despite these obstacles. If you come from a poor neighborhood with no one ever there to believe in you or to treat you like you deserve a better life; then, you're stuck in this trap without any hope for a better way of life. Teachers and mentors are an important part of development, for kids and adults alike. Manchester Bidwell in Pittsburgh addressed this by incorporating these kinds of influential figures into the program. But, really it extends even further into the community itself, where artists and musicians can stay proactively-involved. Josh knows it can be scary to stand up for something you believe in and strive for change.

He revels in advocating for the Manchester Bidwell Replication Project, “Especially, people from the artistic community and music and everything, because the idea unfortunately is it is hard to reach kids in the traditional sense sometimes.” He intuitively knows that education has shifted from traditional learning, to facilitate multiple learning-styles. At-risk-youth and adult-learners struggle with normal book-learning and memorization, because it doesn’t inspire or engage the student as much. Nadzam’s center could be a great place where the prospective student can learn as well as feel inspired. The hope for him is to incorporate art galleries, auditoriums, culinary arts and exquisite boardrooms to truly replicate the Manchester Bidwell initiative that began in Pittsburgh.

In Pittsburgh, Manchester Bidwell became a place where Dizzy Gillespie once came to play a concert for wealthy people. Bill Strickland made an impact on the likes of Dizzy Gillespie, because he did what even one of the greatest, jazz-musicians-of-all-time, thought was impossible. He created a place for poor people, where even wealthy people felt comfortable. Josh made an analogy of when you go into someone’s house for the first time, and you wonder whether or not you should take your shoes off, after you enter. “If the house is a wreck you leave your shoes on, because it’s not going to matter.” Versus the idea that if the house is well-kept you take off your shoes, as a formal manifestation of respect. “And, it’s like at Manchester Bidwell in Pittsburgh when you go in, you don’t know if it’s for poor people, for rich people.” This is Josh’s explanation. Poor people should deserve the same form of respect; which wealthy people get. All of

this can be overwhelming to consider, and sometimes frustrating to envision. It's easy to just throw-in-the-proverbial-towel and just go with what is cheap and low-cost, but that's not what Manchester Bidwell Replication Project hopes to accomplish. It is a transformation of the self, for poor people to reach their potential.

Curation of the self is now a part of our daily lives, love it or hate it this idea is here to stay. Over the last ten years the development of social networking sites, have spurred this curation of self. People adopt profiles that are constantly changing and becoming more and more external-extensions of our personal lives. The social-networking-persona allows a person to change how, when, where, what, why and whom people are perceived to be. Curating our identities is so common in today's world that it is easy to become an armchair-activist.

When I spoke with Nadzam about his run from Lexington to Frankfort for Domestic Violence against Women, he gave me a better understanding about how curation of the self, works. I follow him on several social networking sites, so I get a chance to be aware of his endeavors at any given moment. When, I noticed on Facebook, then on Twitter and finally on Instagram he was running for a cause it sort of made me feel inadequate. I don't do enough for others, because it's like Josh says, "everyone's like, chase your dreams...they can never be too big...but, how many times do we actually do it?" He postulates the assuming nature of the modern social-media- persona, saying it's scary to actually stand up for something you believe in and do something about it.

His analogy of the conveyor-belt-to-death, is introduced in this conversation. Nadzam uses the analogy to show how safe this manufactured route of, “sit on the couch, watch TV, go to bed, wake up, go to work, and then repeat”; really is, for most people that are afraid to make a change. I think he understands how people in today’s society would much rather “like” something that someone else is doing than strive for correcting social injustice. I am often one of these people, but Nadzam is one of those type of people that believes in the power of many. It’s simply not enough to curate ourselves at an arms-length from this digitized, life-experience. He told me that, as people we sort of get on this conveyor-belt-to-death, and he doesn’t want that for his life. So, Nadzam keeps a positive mental attitude through a balance of mind, body and soul. He says, “this kind of stuff it’s very much like running or working out; you’re in that mentality where your body pretty much just wants to quit and you’re like-why am I enduring this pain?” I can recall this mentality easily from memory, because it is an ephemeral moment that subsides. You think, how am I going to ever finish this task-at-hand? Your mind and body want to just collapse. The only way I know how to describe what helps you soldier-on, is your soul. You externalize the struggle in some form and this pain subsides, because your soul can endure what is humanly-impossible. In a way, this is similar to a basketball team that continues to lose important games, as they head toward their goal. The unity is not there, and the body and mind have lost the motivation to continue forward to the goal.

Yet, when the soul becomes a part of the team, this group of athlete's finish and are able to achieve the impossible.

The sound of it is vaguely familiar. Balance of mind, body and soul is the goal, for so many people to endure suffering. As Dr. Cook-Craig alludes to this she says, "The trick is to make sure you don't get frustrated and sprint, when it's really a marathon." Her words meant for Nadzam, are encouraging. I asked her to tell me, what she would want Josh to know, about his progress towards replicating Manchester Bidwell in Lexington, Kentucky. It plucked a few heart strings. I think she knows how meaningful Nadzam's, Manchester Bidwell Replication would be to Lexington and the state of Kentucky. She has no doubt of any one she's ever taught, that Josh Nadzam is the one that will make this Manchester Bidwell Replication project happen. However, anytime there are people who have dreams, inevitably there are cynics that remind them that making these dreams a reality is impossible. Nadzam's project is not without this dichotomous relationship.

At the moment, a Feasibility Study halts this initiative's forward momentum. Letters of support are being written to support the feasibility of the Manchester Bidwell Replication in Lexington, Kentucky. The concern is primarily that Lexington is too small for this center. That the funding could be used elsewhere, is also a concern. That, there are already other centers in Lexington for this community, is another concern. Yet, Grand Rapids in Michigan is significantly smaller than Lexington, but there is a Replication of

Manchester Bidwell there already. This study comes with a \$150,000 price tag and already has a potential donor. When I met with Josh, there was no donor. Awareness of the Manchester Bidwell Replication project in Lexington, Kentucky is another obstacle, because it takes the support of so many for this to happen. Rural parts of Kentucky like Harlan County, where my grandparent's came from, are not always so easy to convince. The substance abuse rates over the last ten years has metastasized. Leaving families, at-risk-youth and adults alike in poverty, the poor are without any steady vocation. Manchester Bidwell Replication might be much larger than Nadzam, ever imagined. The state of Kentucky as a whole could benefit from something like this center in Lexington, Kentucky. Yet, the treatment facilities, methadone clinics and halfway-homes are businesses too. Manchester Bidwell is also a business, but the approach to the cure is much different. When imprisonment becomes more important than education, communities continue to downward spiral. It's like Bill Strickland and Josh Nadzam believe though, with their countless efforts to combat poverty. Would you rather spend money to help someone or an insane amount more to lock them up in prison? I see homeless people all of the time in Lexington. I do my best to acknowledge them and give them a few moments of my precious time. Even in this extreme case of poverty, mental-illness is a factor and many believe it is incurable.

I don't have a cure for this sickness or even an idea of how to go about finding one. The key is to remember this is a marathon and not a sprint. Smaller

initiatives like this article are the most I have to offer. I am just one person, with my own opinions and I realize that is insufficient to fund an entire transformational non-profit organization. It is one candle at a vigil to recognize the lives lost in the struggle of poverty. This is in a way my homage to the grandparents I lost last year, after years of them watching my transformation from a hopeless state of mind. This is to lighting another person's candle, the one in their heart. This is for a friend of mine, so that they may light another candle in the soul of someone that's mind and body are giving-up. If enough of these small insignificant fractions of light may illuminate someone's path that didn't think they were on one, this might be enough. I did not travel alone and the many of those I passed as I ran on this road, knew I was running for lives. I kept running for the lives of people that needed me to, because I too once, was in their shoes. The debt I can never fully repay, is to all of those that helped me along the way; cheering and believing in me, when my soul was lost.

Sometimes, you get an opportunity to be the change you wish to see in the world. Manchester Bidwell Replication Project is one of those opportunities. Bill Strickland, Josh Nadzam, Dr. Cook-Craig and so many others have made this initiative seem possible. Until, the day comes when this center is a part of the Lexington community, I know Josh Nadzam will continue running for lives. Making dreams become a reality is no easy task. Manchester Bidwell Replication Project is a dream in a sense, but also already feels like a tangible possibility.



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## Chapter Nine: Odeith's Satchmo

There's a certain jazz musician persona he takes on as he's painting Louis Armstrong, also known as Satchmo. The rhythm and style of his work makes the music of Satchmo come to life in the whirl of Lexington traffic, passersby and atmosphere around him as he paints the mural. Odeith (pronounced 'Eighth') is painting a mural of Louis Armstrong on the side of a building in Lexington, Kentucky. He is from Lisbon, Portugal. His bronzed complexion, zip-up hoodie and low profile style help him to blend in with the crowd. If you walk up when he's on break you won't know who the artist or who the audience is. He looks like a number of migrant workers you might see working on horse farms. Yet, when he speaks you know he is not from around North America.

Word spread on Instagram that PRHBTN (pronounced 'Prohibition') and Kentucky for Kentucky commissioned him to paint a mural. PRHBTN is an organization in Lexington known for their grassroots funding. They bring street artists from all over the world to paint commissioned murals. John Winters, the founder of PRHBTN and Griffin Van Meter of Kentucky for Kentucky had a brief falling out over the destruction of Odeith's original mural. Kentucky for Kentucky, founded by Griffin Van Meter, is a community organization aimed at community, art, and all things Kentucky. The first time Odeith painted a mural, a crew accidentally power washed it away, a year or so ago. Griffin Van Meter — took the blame for the power washing debacle. Kentucky for Kentucky got together with PRHBTN and decided to bring Odeith back again to paint another

mural. They have since then made amends and commenced to work together for the greater good of the city.

On October 6th, 2015 I meet Odeith for the first time. I ride my bike to Elm Tree Lane on the Northside of Lexington. The morning is cool and the sun is starting to shine. Fall weather is still warm on this day with a high of eighty degrees. Clear skies prepare the perfect day to paint a mural on the freshly primed golden yellow wall of Lighthouse Ministries. Lighthouse is a homeless shelter in Lexington known for it's brown bag lunches allotted to the city's homeless. On an average day, during the extreme hot or cold, you might see a line of fifty to a hundred people lined up outside of the homeless shelter. Today, a power lift, made for asphalt, sits lonely in the gravel parking lot. As soon as Odeith arrives on the scene he is instantly discouraged. The wheels of the power lift are rubberized metal, not made to move in gravel. They spin as workers lay down sheets of particle board in a parallel line in front of the mural wall.

"This is not going to work man. The lift is not made for this. I turn on the machine and the wheels just spin, it won't let me move to get the angle I need." Odeith tells the associate of Kentucky for Kentucky with extreme frustration in his voice.

"Alright, I'm going to call Griffin and we'll have to see if we can get another lift here this afternoon. Until then you think you can start painting?"

“No, no man. It’s not the right lift. I’m only here for the next few days and I want to get it done quick. If I start now and the lift doesn’t work it’s just going to slow me down.”

“I understand. I’ll see what I can do.”

I walk over and introduce myself to Odeith and try to mitigate the situation. He tells me that his plan was to come here, start painting, be done with enough time later in the week to do some sightseeing. I can tell Odeith is frustrated so I try to change the subject from the lift to his artwork. We talk about some recent anamorphic murals he’s done. Usually, he works with an adjoining axis to create an image distortion effect. He explains that this wall is different from his usual walls in that the sunlight that hits the wall requires vivid colors. Since it’s not anamorphic this mural requires precise, photographic realism. I imagine, Odeith knows this wall on Lighthouse Ministries is an important place for his Satchmo mural, given the history of the homeless shelter. Some sources say – Louis Armstrong may have played the Lyric Theater, right down the road, in its heyday.

### Painting Satchmo

Time is valuable for any street artist; so, Odeith begins painting the first day on the improper power lift. Black spray paint against the golden yellow wall creates a formal figure drawing that resembles a crash test dummy. He uses wide circular motions to create the head. Moving down the lift, Odeith pushes levers

back and forth as the wheels crackle the particle board. You can tell that he's mad, but he paints adapting to the setback. Soon, hash marks appear, creating the body of the figure. Odeith lowers the lift, raises the gate where he's standing, and jumps down walking away from the wall. Griffin shows up and they talk for a few minutes. He tells Odeith that a new lift will be there by this afternoon. His morale rises a bit and Odeith goes back to work. Within several hours he makes more hash marks, connects them, then finishes the outline on the first day.

Throughout the first day I notice as I'm sitting in the gravel that Odeith keeps a lanyard with a clear plastic pocket where his phone is attached. He refers to back to it often. Here is his picture of Louis Armstrong. He's using it to bring the picture to scale. As the size scale seems off or not right to him he uses a yellow paint brush to touch-up the mistakes like a giant eraser. As Odeith is painting a few people stop by and ask who he is. What is this guy painting? Who is the artist? Usually, when Odeith comes off the power lift for a break he answers the same questions over and over again very politely.

The next day by 11:30 am Odeith already has the upper head bronze colored, with white accents on the skin to show dexterity. The skin and smile lines are all golden yellow. He works the varying spray paint nozzles over the face of Louis Armstrong with brown and bronze spray paint. Odeith moves the lift back to the top of the head and sprays black and purple spray paint in circular motions to create lifelike hair follicles. Then he moves back down on the lift to the mouth, where he begins outlining the teeth with brown spray paint. He

then uses the black to re-outline each tooth. As he grabs another can the rattle inside keeps the paint from clotting. A couple of sprays away from the wall make sure the stream of spray paint is even. Then he begins with square outlines of each tooth using white spray paint. Each tooth is then filled in accordingly, with up and down movements, until Louis Armstrong's grin is revealed.

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While Odeith is painting this mural, nearby, a man gives free haircuts to the homeless. A foldout metal chair sits in the gravel and the buzz of the barber's clippers are in the distance. One by one the barber gives homeless men a fresh haircut and a new demeanor for the day.

Dave and Sonya ask me to join them along with Griffin for some Tai Chi. I'm apprehensive, but I agree. Beneath the Kentucky for Kentucky tent are two camp chairs, a table and a cooler full of water and beer. I wait for Odeith and Griffin to finish their lunch from National Provisions; a local eatery and neighborhood fresh market. Then Dave (an older man with a likeness to Steve Buscemi) instructs myself along with Sonya (middle-aged woman resembling Eva Green) in some basic Tai Chi routines.

Dave stands beside me and tells me Tai Chi is a series of fluid motions that are not aggressive martial art moves.

"The purpose of Tai Chi is defense. Essentially it teaches you to harness the Chi and direct it towards the aggressor. With Tai Chi we learn that if someone

attacks us we can go on forever defending ourselves against harm.” Dave explains to me as we go through a series of nine or ten movements.

I say, “I understand from what I have heard of Tai Chi, that it is usually practiced beside flowing water.”

“Yes, that is one area where you can practice that reminds us of the fluidity of the Chi.” Dave tells me as he cycles effortlessly through the Tai Chi movements.

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After lunch is over on the second day I begin watching Odeith again, asking myself questions as he spray paints the mural. What are all of the components of a trumpet called? I wonder if the spray paint makes him sick? After some research and questions for Odeith, I find my answers. The mouthpiece, finger buttons, valves, finger hooks, water key and bell are the most interesting to me. Odeith uses Montana Color spray paint which follows health, ecology and quality standards. A specially designed respirator is worn to ensure he’s getting fresh air.

The bell of the trumpet becomes a small microcosm of black, dark purple, cherry and tan. Odeith paints the eyebrows of Louis Armstrong with wispy motions to give them dexterity. Each area of his wall takes moving the power lift up, over, down, back and forth to give him the angles he needs. Yet, he stops each time to focus on every particular area for several minutes. Then he takes a few minutes to get off the lift and check out the perspective of the audience. His work is all in the immediacy.

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On October 8th, the scene gets lively. A man comes up to me while I'm taking notes and asks me (assuming I am Odeith's publicist), You think he could paint a picture of Jesus on my guitar? I would get it tattooed on me, but I don't like needles.

The audience grows today into a mixture of people with social and mental health issues. Most of them have bad teeth. All of them are happy to see the mural on Lighthouse Ministries. A man in a Keeneland hat, baseball jersey, wearing red and white shoes talks to me about art in Cincinnati. He knows all about the new director of the UofK art museum. He was once a student at UofK and said he loves "the cow painting".

A homeless woman searches through the empty spray paint cans to the far right of the mural and asks, does anyone need any paint? Homeless people are gathered outside of Lighthouse Ministries in a long line waiting to get inside for the brown bag lunches. Odeith looks back at me and nods, What's up. A minister prays with a man in the parking lot about his heroine addiction. Various photographers take pictures with tripods. Odeith is rolling yellow primer over the black shadow behind Louis Armstrong's head.

He looks over at Griffin and pretends to roll yellow paint over the face of the mural and says, "Hey Griff! Should I start doing your job?!?"

Griffin laughs at the obvious jab in reference to him inadvertently having Odeith's mural power washed. Odeith has accomplished a lot since yesterday.



“I didn’t like the way the shadow behind the head turned out.” Odeith tells me on a break.

The body, arms, hands and trumpet are all colored in now. He tells me he used about forty cans of Montana Color spray paint thus far. The color palette is actually 10-12 colors, which is a few more than I estimated earlier. The palette consists of: two purples, two pinks, two blacks, two oranges, one cherry, two yellows and one white. The sleeves of Louis’ shirt are plaid brown, white and orange. Odeith’s headphones are in, his respirator covers his face, while he listens to instrumentals most likely trip-hop or electronica. I imagine the music keeps him in the zone while he paints the mural. Odeith’s respirator is on today and he reminds me of a character from Star Wars. He sprays paint with left to right sweeping motions, while he colors in the jacket violet and dark purple. Then back up to the lapels of the jacket a spread out of paint sprays from the can to add more texture. The garment is given much more solid and heavy spray paint with criss-crossing peachy then cherry red light sprays. Black streaks throughout the suit coat accent the outline of wrinkles and lapels. This masterful street artist named Odeith from Lisbon, Portugal gave us this.

#### Reception of Odeith’s Satchmo

Three days later on October 11th, 2015 Odeith finishes his mural of Satchmo. Kentucky for Kentucky has a party to celebrate one of Lexington’s newest works of art. The spray paint is fresh, but dry now. Vivid colors, photographic realism, a sense of revitalization gives the celebration meaning. In

the parking lot of Lighthouse Ministries are families, children and homeless people admiring the mural of Louis Armstrong. I Love You, What a Wonderful World is the inscription on the far left of the mural. Odeith's name is tagged on the upper right-hand side. His message and mural are received with high praise and bring together the community of people whom would normally not mix.

A deejay plays jazz songs, free food and a sense of belonging for all encompasses the Lighthouse Ministries parking lot. Children run around playing in front of the wall, taking pictures. People of all races, beliefs and social classes are gathering to become part of this historic mural. I can imagine how this mural will age over time. Perhaps, the paint will begin to fade, peel and the wall will crack. The weather will continue to influence the aging process. One fact remains the same. For this day, Lexington enjoys the community for all of it's quirks, shortcomings and desires to grow in culture.

Odeith talks with everyone he can at the party. He answers the same questions over and over again with the same politeness. Accepting the high praise of everyone. A sincere humbleness is within his smile. The Louis Armstrong mural shows us what public art means today in Lexington. Public spaces where people of all cultures respect one another and share love. This mural brings a conversation to our public space. Yet, it is the public space where this conversation begins. Now every time anyone sees this mural of Satchmo on the side of Lighthouse Ministries they can be reminded to see what he saw.

Odeith's Satchmo is more than a mural; it is a call to action. What a wonderful world it can be when we love one another.

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## Chapter Ten: How I Met Kiptoo Tarus

“What is this, huge dicks in the neighborhood?” my friend says to me one day while we’re hanging out in his backyard, checking out some of his artwork. Don’t mind all of the phallic symbols in nearly every big city in the United States. Worry and complain, if you’re ever fortunate enough to live next to an artist from another country, creating cultural art which happen to be gourds. Call your local government and let them know there’s an act of terrorism going on next door. Maybe a moniker like Banksy, Dronex or something would better suit his creations. I can understand why those artists choose to live behind the veil of their name. Still, looking at the collection from his home/art studio/backyard/himself, this dude radiates a certain aura of pain and suffering. I met Kiptoo Tarus last summer while at a magical place we can call Wook Mountain for now.

Estill County is close enough to Red River Gorge to say it’s one in the same. Rolling hills and knotty, green-vined hollers encompass the landscape. As I’m driving to Estill County in June 2015 I have anxiety flowing through my legs. I’m itching to get out of the car after an hour and a half drive to hike, swim, and let my dog Lucky run wild. A friend of mine, Arthur, is the reason I’m heading out to this farm so far off-the-grid as you might say that even our cellphones stop working a mile away from our destination. Arthur’s sawing through gravel roads in his Toyota truck, all the while playing music for me to hear that I usually don’t take the time to listen to. What I always wanted to know is, why do

people like to listen to Bluegrass music so much in Kentucky? All of the older Bluegrass to me sounds like a church service. I can't take the indoctrinated Christian lingo and guilt or shame. I grew up with that stuff and I don't care to relive it, I'm a recovering Catholic.

The place called Wook Mountain is actually a man named Dave's homestead in Estill County. He's an old hippie that built this geothermal house, a man-made pond (thank god for dynamite), a couple of outdoor screened-in facilities, a massive garden, three raunchy poodles and a master craftsman named Aaron. If this were Mt. Olympus Dave would be Zeus and Aaron would be Hermes. Although, the two fellars are not of blood relation they do exude a certain dynamic relationship. A binary opposition if you will, of farmer and farm hand. I'm not too sure how Arthur met Dave and Aaron, all I know is they're friends of friends. To Arthur and all, this off-the-grid palace of sorts, is known as Wook Mountain. This is the place where I meet Kiptoo Tarus for the first time.

Kiptoo came with two other guys. They're hanging out in one of the outdoor screened-in facilities, known as the Kitchen. In a way, to me, it looks like a kitchen but more so a bungalow for hanging hammocks and chiefting fine grass. "Hey, I'm John," one of the guys says to me when I walk into the outdoor Kitchen.

"Hi, Jesse," shaking his hand, I say, with my firm grip against a softer easier one.

"I am Kiptoo," he says with a thick African accent.

Another guys swinging in a hammock waves and says, "What's up, Dustin."

“How long ya’ll been here?” I ask to keep the conversation moving.

One of the guys is packing a onie about to share some smoke. So, I can tell they’re a little preoccupied. It smells like good herb and not the pressed seedly stuff.

“We got here a few hours ago, just posted up in this here byomp-shack.” John tells me, as I figure out he’s the most outgoing of the three.

Everything is referred to as the sound a bullfrog makes at night around the pond in Estill County. Byomp. This word becomes a staple in the conversation and lingo over the next few days and I’ve been unable to shake it from my lexicon.

After the brief introduction, I get a quick tour around the house and find a place to camp for the night. The next day Kiptoo, John and Dustin are sitting up by the house in lounge chairs. They all three decided to take a vision quest today and it’s Kip’s first time. They’re urging him to take it easy and not overdo it. I’m sitting beside them lounging in the sun while one of the poodles tries incessantly to hump Lucky dog. I don’t see the three of the vision questers for a few hours.

When I do, Dustin keeps trying to paddle a canoe into the shoreline, John is digging a trench with a shovel and Kip’s in the distance painting a watercolor of the pond. I decide to walk over to where Kip is and check out his painting, while he’s off in the distance looking for lumber to carve.

Later on in the day Kip paddles over to the dock in a canoe rather than walking around the pond. I strike up a conversation about him and his painting. He tells me he usually does woodwork sculptures and uses chainsaws, chisels and

planes. I have a conversation with him about writing and he shows me a book he's been reading. It's some older sculptor's book that discusses technique and design. At the time, I can remember thinking he was just some kind of artist that haphazardly picks up books and teaches himself how to create different works of art.

### Festival of the Bluegrass

A few weeks later, I see Kiptoo again at the Festival of the Bluegrass out in Georgetown at the Kentucky Horse Park. Our friends (the Wooks) were invited by the Cornett's to play so Kip's here to sell some artwork at the campsite. The first person I see when I get to the camp is Kip, sitting in a camp chair smoking a cig. We greet each other as if it's been a while, yet always good to see each other once again.

"These hands yours?" I ask Kip referring to the wooden hands masterfully-carved.

"Ah yeah's, those are mine."

His thick Kenyan accent is warm always very blunt. I sort of have to pry at him to get any kind of real conversation moving. Sometimes heads are like that.

"So, what's the story behind these guys? You selling them?"

"I carved all of these out of one piece of wood," they're special to me. Each one represents a dead person's hand I imagine Kip saying to me, instead of the pitch for the weekend.

It's not until the second night of me driving back and forth to the Festival of the Bluegrass due to my work schedule that I get a chance to see Kip in action. So, during the day Bluegrass bands play music on a large stage in front of a crowd in camp chairs. The event is really informal and suggests you lounge and listen to the peaceful melodies of stringed-instruments. Later in the evening, after the sun starts setting pink to blue to violet the crowd starts to liven up somewhat. Plastic cups filled with bourbon and the smell of good reefer floats through the air. After the music dies down at the main stage, the musicians head back to camp for jam sessions. Here, I get to watch Kiptoo in action for the first time. Multiple Bluegrass musicians are circled up in a cypher of sorts. Mandolins, banjos, guitars and upright bassists make for a lively setting. I look over and see Kip's starting to create these charcoal drawings with little light under the shelter. I always wondered how artists can create right on the spot artwork amidst so many people. Kip was there to show to me that art can be created wherever you are whenever you feel inspired. It's something that I often take for granted as I sit and watch everything going on and try to remember to write it down later. There's always a discrepancy though when I'm scribbling notes and not paying direct attention to what exactly is going on in the moment.

Kip's got an easel set up in front of himself, while John uses a headlamp to give him some light. His hands work in quick wide strokes with pieces of charcoal used for sketching figures. I crane my neck around the side of the canvas while I'm sitting on a camp cot. Kip's essentially drawing figure sketches



with circular and linear body composites. To me, in the humble beginning it looks like something I can easily emulate. My attention goes back to the musical cypher and notice Lucky dog is sitting right in the middle of the musicians. It's like Lucky thinks they're playing her a birthday song or something.

"Aw, look how cute her is over there listening to the music, Jesse!" my friend Anna says to me across the camp, as she takes a drag from a cigarette.

"Yeah, her is in tune with music, she's funny like that," I respond to Anna as I smile admiring my goofy dog. "That's why I call her deedledog the sound of all that plucking and picking is where she got her nickname."

Meanwhile, Kip's almost done with his second portrait. I tell John, who seems to be his salesman for the time being, I would like him to draw me a picture. John gestures to me and I think he's ignoring my offer. A few minutes later, John and Kip talk after the music stops and Kip shows a couple of the musicians in the cypher the portrait of themselves. He tells them they can't buy it though. It's already been accounted for and bought. Kip pulls me aside and whispers to me, "That picture is yours, it's Lucky dog. I made it for you man. Before, you asked John I was already drawing Lucky dog in the picture and I said this is Jesse's. But, don't let them know (he points to the two musicians from the cypher) I already told them it was accounted for and they wanted to buy it from me. I made this for you man." I'm overwhelmed with gratitude. Kip is such a kind person, but always business-minded. Even though he offers to give it to me for free, I give him twenty bucks. "Man, Kip this is one of the nicest things

ever done for me dude. I really appreciate it. Thanks.” I say, after he sprays some liquid preservative on the paper canvas I immediately hide the picture and take it to my car. I realize I got an original masterpiece from a budding artist and it takes the form of a heist of sorts from potential buyers who might outbid me in the end. Still, Kip expresses his connection with me I believe for our conversation at Tom’s Cabin in Estill County.

#### Back to Tom’s Cabin

The same weekend I went to Wook Mountain for the first time, Kip and I bonded at Tom’s Cabin over by Dripping Springs in Estill County. Tom is a neighbor of Dave and Aaron’s that lives a holler over from their abode. Tom’s a Vietnam vet with great carpentry skills that drove him to build a cabin in the middle of nowhere, despite being in the middle of nowhere. Tom’s Cabin is like the hike you make once you’re in the Himalayas from the village to the summit of some Zen temple of a mountaintop ascetic or monk. It’s a sanctuary where the emptiness and solace of loneliness in the woods meets serenity. Kip, Arthur, Anna and myself hiked to Tom’s Cabin one afternoon from Wook Mountain. When we arrived at the place it reminded me of some log cabin you might see out west in the prairie of Jackson Hole, Wyoming or Telluride, Colorado. Even though I haven’t actually been to either of those places I can imagine this is what they must feel like. Kip hiked the whole way there without shoes on, and we all joke, “Because Kenyans and Kentuckians can only do that kind of shit.”

Kip and I are sitting on the railing of Tom's Cabin upstairs looking out into the distance, admiring the solitude and quiet of this sanctuary.

"In Kenya, my mother raised all of us. She was the reason we always had food to eat, clothes to wear and a place to live. She built our home. She tilled the ground. She planted the vegetables. She gathered the materials and made our clothes."

Kip explains to me.

"Yeah, that's kind of like my grandmother. She made lots of stuff for my family. She was a seamstress of sorts. Always making upholstery, toys, clothes, growing food and making their house our home. She died a couple of years ago." I grow silent waiting for Kip to understand.

Kip says to me, "I miss my family a lot. They are there and I am here. Sometimes, I think I'm selfish for coming to America and leaving them."

"I don't think you're selfish dude. It's like with my grandparents, even though they're gone, I know they're still always here with me wherever I go. In my heart, I take them everywhere with me. And I'm sure it's the same for you bud." I try to relate the best I can to Kip's experience.

A few moments later, all of us are back downstairs again. Kip's found a seat in an old claw-foot bathtub on the front porch of Tom's Cabin. I'm sitting next to him dangling my feet off the porch when I see several small butterflies flittering around in the daylight. One of the butterfly's lands on the brim of Kiptoo's straw hat. I hold out my hand and notice the tube of my Camelbak is nearby. The butterflies circle around me and I think they're trying to get close to

the source of the water in my Camelbak. I hold out my hand and three of them land in my palm.

"Look there, Jesse. Those are your grandparents." Kip says to me, which is weird because I always sort of found this similar association with butterflies.

"Yep, one for each of them that passed away in the last few years." I mumble to myself more than enough for Kip to hear me.

"Man that is Wook vibes going on over there." Kip says.

"I think they just need a drink man. They're probably just tired of flying around everywhere, I just happened to be offering them a place to land for a few seconds."

#### The Lyric and Award-Winning Artist

I really have no idea who or why I meet the people I do until some time later. A few months later, in the Fall of 2015 I start seeing Kip's hands all up and down Short Street in Lexington, Kentucky. He's doing some big things now. Recently, his artwork made some waves in the local community again at The Lyric on the eastside of downtown. We have an amazing artist in our midst, who is currently battling some demons from what I hear. Like all great artists the creation process often does not come with some degree of pain and suffering. Kip's been on my mind lately as I keep hearing all of the wonderful news about his success lately with his artwork. I think that sometimes it can be nerve-racking for the artist to create so much beauty, that they forget to remember they are too, beautiful. I always worry about my friends that I see suddenly get so much

attention after working so hard for so long without any admiration for their work. Call it my apprehensiveness to fame or desire to remain somewhat anonymous.

“He apparently, got really drunk a while back and sent some harsh emails to his professors from UK. Now, he’s in trouble for some terroristic threatening and possible deportation for his actions. It’s become a real kind of touchy subject.” a couple of friends explain to me recently over the weekend.

This bums me out, because people make mistakes all of the time. It seems like if you’re from another country and you step on someone’s toes the death penalty is handed to you. In this case, Kip’s fame as of late has been somewhat tainted by his actions as an outsider. He can get all of the notoriety for his pain, suffering and artwork he can handle. Yet, there’s something missing. Self-sabotage or the element of agency and a place to feel at one with your surroundings. Maybe, this is Kip’s way of saying an Irish Goodbye. A butterfly in the hand, settling in your palm for a few seconds to rest, just for you to acknowledge its beauty. Then before we can try to tame it, it flies away forever.

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## Chapter 11: Conclusion: Ad Infinitum

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, "What lies behind you and what lies in front of you, pales in comparison to what lies inside of you." My mother gave me a magnet with this quote. I internalized the message of the quotation, and tried to be a better man. I've failed at truly capturing North Limestone in its ugliness, its quirkiness, its beauty. I've failed at finding the right words to say to make anyone believe I know exactly how things are today here on the Northside. I've failed at talking to the right people for just the right amount of time for all of the right reasons. What I have not done is stop asking questions. What I have not done is stop learning from this city, these people, myself. Every now and then I surprise myself by how fortunate I truly am to live where I do. Despite the crime, the hipsters, the incessant road work, I've gained some insight into how so many other people live.

It's true, I'm not a native to Lexington, nor do I claim to be. However, I'm trying to leave things better than I found them. This is something I learned from my father. Although our political beliefs are vastly different, I do value having lessons I learned from my parents. Aside from familial responsibilities I know that two parents are never enough to raise, teach or give the needed experience to their children. I needed many many villagers to help raise me. If there isn't a positive community around you molding your growth, then your failures become your downfall. Thankfully, I've been surrounded by lots of failures.

Many people that have faced adversity and continue working towards a better tomorrow.

I believe that people come into each other's lives for a reason. There are teachers everywhere. Some lessons are more painful than others. The North Limestone community has changed quite a bit since I moved into the neighborhood, a little over three years ago. I've been in love here; I've had my heart broken here. I've worked here; I've been fired here. I've gained knowledge here; I've acted foolish here. While I could go on forever speaking in terrible clichés I won't. North Limestone is really difficult to put into words. The three that come to mind most often for me are community, culture and art. There's a collection of history on this end of town. It's expansive as far as the eye can see. The road is always under construction.

One hope that I have for myself is that I will never stop learning. The Zone as Old School calls North Limestone has taught me how to be more like water. Adapting is a big part of life here, and change is something necessary for every individual. Instead of changing other people or our environment, why not start first with ourselves. I would be a hypocrite if I didn't say that I'm better at giving this advice than I am at following it. I'm trying though, to be more like water, to keep asking questions, to learn. I haven't given up yet.

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Jesse Houk is an emerging writer from Louisville, Kentucky. He writes poetry, fiction and creative nonfiction. He currently lives in Lexington, Kentucky with his dog, Lucky. He is part of the Class of 2016, MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Kentucky. As a part of the inaugural class of MFA students he participated in the first ever MFA driven collection of writing about art in the UofK Art Museum's permanent collection. The book can be found under the title *Feel It With Your Eyes* published by Factory 500 Press. His work ranges from metafiction to literary journalism to surrealism poetry. He is a secular humanist, avid runner and social awareness advocate.

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## Vita

I was born in Louisville, Kentucky. I attended the University of Louisville, Jefferson Community College and the University of Kentucky. I was awarded a Bachelor of Arts in English with a minor in Communications from the University of Kentucky in May 2014. I was awarded a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing from the University of Kentucky in May 2016. I have worked as an account associate for Sizewise LLC; a banker at Commonwealth Bank & Trust; a legal-aid for Weber & Rose PSC; and also as a Master Carpenter's assistant for my father, Robert L. Houk Jr. My work has been published in "Feel It with Your Eyes" writing about art in the University of Kentucky Art Museum, alongside other fellow MFA students of the inaugural class of MFA in Creative Writing.

Jesse Logan Houk